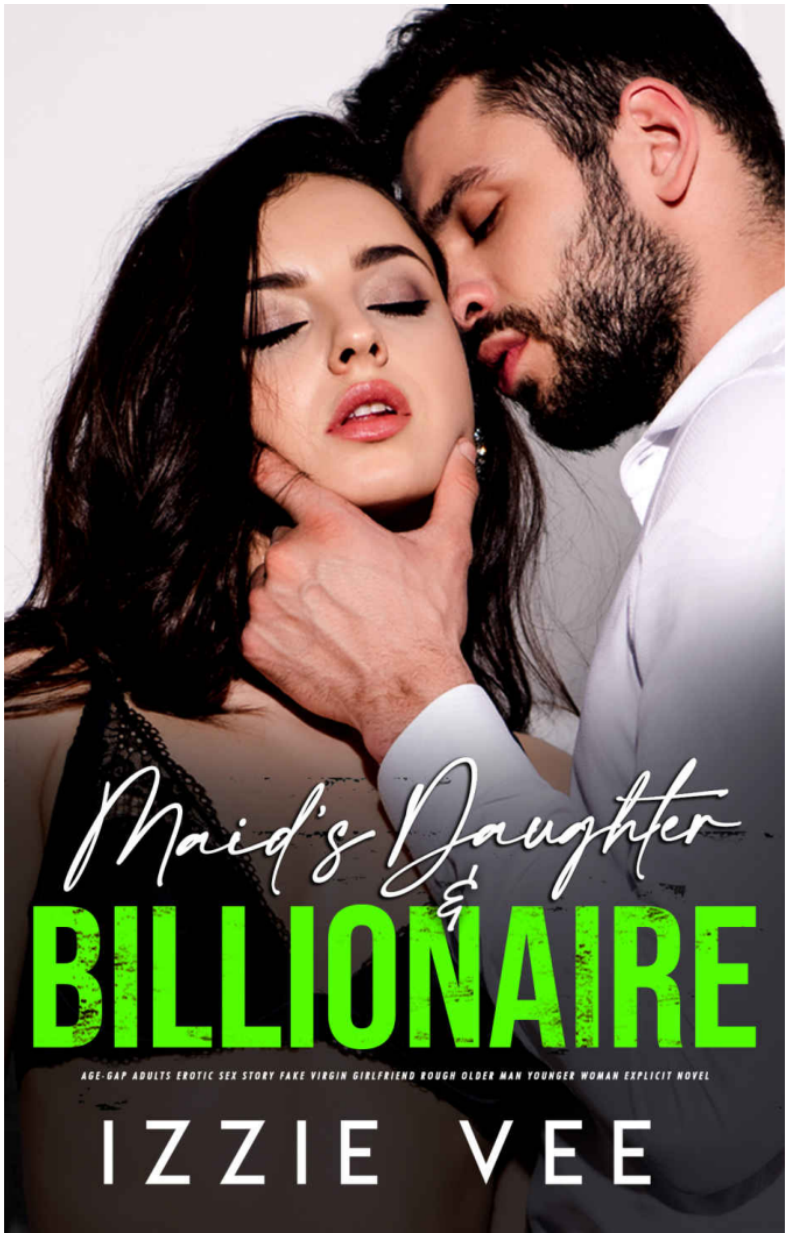
Maid's Daughter
&
BILLIONAIRE
AGE-GAP ADULTS EROTIC SEX STORY FAKE VIRGIN GIRLFRIEND ROUGH OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN EXPLICIT NOVEL
IZZIE VEE

Maid's Daughter & Billionaire: Age-Gap Adults Erotic Sex Story

Fake Virgin Girlfriend Rough Older Man Younger Woman Explicit Novel

Steamy, Forced & Forbidden Romance

IZZIE VEE

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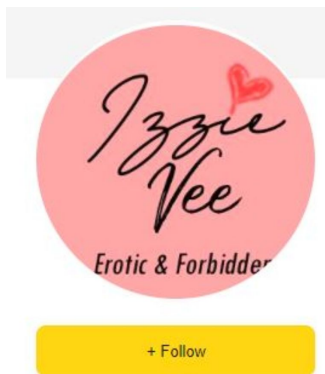

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Chapter 1

Jackson

"This is it," the real estate agent said. "A piece of paradise for a good price."

With my hands tucked in my pockets, my gaze traveled over the high ceilings in the living area and the stone fireplace, which contrasted beautifully with the plain white walls.

The large windows provided just enough natural light, adding to the already organic feeling, and I could feel the tug of a smile on my lips as I looked through the back doors to the glistening pool.

"I think this is the best one we've seen so far," my image consultant and best friend, Paul, said as he moved closer to me.

I managed a tight and brief smile as I glanced at him and then back at the interior design of the empty space. "I agree."

“And it’s in your budget,” he joked before nodding seriously. “You should get it.”

I pulled in a breath as I glanced at the real estate agent, who was slightly leaning towards us, pretending like it was an accident even though I knew she was listening in. When her gaze met mine, she smiled brightly. Was she just a good saleswoman, or was she trying to find a way to get Paul or me into a more personal relationship?

“This is perfect, Mr. Reid. It’s far enough away from the city to get some peace and quiet. A great place to make those brilliant ideas of yours flow,” she said.

“I’ll think about it,” I said as I moved toward the door. The last thing I saw before I left was the shocked look on Paul’s face as he quickly ran to catch up behind me.

“You’re not going to pass this up, are you?” He asked when I was just outside the huge mahogany door.

I stopped as the wind whipped my hair. “Patience wins out on big deals.”

“Jackson, this is recently constructed, off the radar like you’ve always wanted, and it

fits that modern, organic vibe you were going for," he said as his green eyes scanned my face, confused.

"I said I'd consider it," I snapped, before calming slightly. "This place is too big for one person, so if I lose it, so be it."

"Won't that make it harder for people you don't like to find you even if they find the house?" he asked. I rolled my eyes, but he continued. "And, in a few years, you could have a whole family here. Little Jacksons running all over the place."

I scoffed as I started to walk towards my car. The driver immediately rushed to have the door open before I arrived.

"Mr. Reid?" The real estate agent called, hurrying behind us quickly. "I can talk to the buyers if the price is-"

"I'll be in touch."

"Sir?"

"Don't sell it just yet," I said firmly.

Her lips moved, prepared to say something, but after a second, she clamped them back shut and nodded. I slid into the car

and shut the door while pinching the bridge of my nose.

"Take me home," I ordered.

With a nod from the rear view, the car started, and we were off. I'd hoped for some time alone to ponder, but Paul was never the type to appreciate silence ... or thinking things through.

"Maybe you should give Jessica another chance. You'll have those babies around your feet in no time," Paul said.

"What part of Jessica Lynn screams mother to you?" I asked. Maybe Paul had seen something I'd not.

He shrugged as he adjusted his glasses. "No one really knows how to be a mother until it happens. She could be good for your future."

"Jessica's not the future I want. We're better off not knowing each other," I said as I looked through the window, surprised that we were still not at the main gate.

"Come on, you guys would make a power couple. You'd be Hollywood's biggest

thing," he said as if that was the be all and end all.

"That would only benefit Jessica."

"Well, you'd finally get the family you've always wanted, and it would strengthen a few bonds."

"You saw how Jessica and I fought. She's not the only woman in the world, and I'm not desperate, Paul," I said, flashing him a cold expression.

"Of course, you're not, but hey, at least she was a hundred percent real with ya. You're a fucking billionaire, and there are women out there ready to lick your feet if you ask, but at the end of the day, we both know they all really want your money."

"I fail to see how Jessica was different."

"She's a makeup influencer who managed to get herself to star status. She already knows what being famous is like, and she has her own money, so yes, she is different," he outlined.

I shook my head. "Jessica is just like the other gold-diggers out there. She's just more

sophisticated."

Paul blew out a heavy breath and slouched further in his chair. "I'm starting to wonder if even *you* know what you want. Because that house won't be on the market forever, and single bachelor Jackson Reid is starting to grow old."

I kept my mouth shut on that one because maybe then, Paul would leave me with the silence I craved. He saw everything in terms of business, including relationships. How could a month-long fling increase share prices? Which girl could help cement my legacy? Which knew how to act the part at events? He didn't worry about the emotional side of things.

To quote him: "Emotions come and go, but a business partnership can last forever."

"By the way, the charity gala is coming up. Who's gonna be your plus one?" He asked.

Somehow, I'd forgotten about that amongst all the other business demands and house hunting.

"I don't know. I might not attend this year," I shrugged.

“We both know these are things you don’t miss. You have to be there,” he emphasized. “And if you’re alone, you’ll be swamped with people – the one thing you hate more than office politics.”

I continued staring at him.

“You have to go, you realize that, right? You checked yes, and a number of people are going just because you are.”

“I don’t *have to* do anything,” I declared.

Paul huffed. “What’s gotten into you, huh? You’re being more difficult than usual today.”

I exhaled sharply. “You’re exaggerating.”

“Am I?”

“You’re my best friend and my advisor, and I appreciate you, I don’t need you to advise on my personal life.”

He scratched his brow. “Fine, I’ll ease up a bit on the house and dating, but the gala is a must. Don’t worry, I’ll find a beautiful, sophisticated girl to be on your arm.”

I didn’t bother answering.

“I could call one of your favorite exes. They’re all used to this thing.”

I flashed him a look, and he raised his hands in surrender. Finally, I had silence. Exhaling, I closed my eyes, eager to savor the moment. And it only lasted a moment since Paul didn’t understand the meaning of peace.

As he talked, I thought about the house we’d just walked through. It was better than I expected after seeing the photos, but there were too many things to consider — things that I’d ignored when I had called the real estate agent. It was one of those decisions I’d made on a whim without thinking it through, but I should have known that ‘impulsive’ wasn’t a train I was comfortable riding. How many times has history proved spontaneity had problems?

I should have just bought a cabin in Portland for my infrequent vacations while sticking to my penthouse for the time being. At this point, needing a large house was a reach, and it was a bigger reach thinking I could have a family in it.

After dropping Paul off, the car brought

me around to my apartment building. I received a few interested looks, which reminded me of one of the reasons for wanting a house in the first place. No matter how rich or popular the people around me were, somehow, I still managed to catch the public's attention.

Still, I managed to get the elevator upstairs to myself. A few brief moments when no one cared how I looked and expected nothing of me.

I peeled off my jacket and slung it into a nearby chair as I walked further into my penthouse. The sound of my own footsteps testified to how lonely it was living alone in a big city. Days like these made the prospect of a family most appealing. Children to pass a legacy onto while giving them a childhood that I'd missed out on.

But this was L.A., and the people who weren't fake were already taken, or they were looking for someone to pull them up to get to where they wanted to be. Fake, taken, or greedy.

So, what did that make me?

***

Later that night, I sat in bed, working on my laptop, when my phone dinged. I glanced over at the unfamiliar number, and my forehead wrinkled. Very few people had my number, and none should have access without my permission. An unknown number raised security concerns.

I opened my message, and my frown deepened when I realized it was from Jessica.

Clenching my teeth, I reread the message.

Hi babe, word on the street is you need a date for the charity gala. I'm more than willing to help out despite our differences.

My thumb lingered over the screen as I considered blocking her, but she had proven time and time again that she was relentless and very capable. She'd find another way to torment me if I ignored her.

No thanks, I already have one. Before I could give it any thought, the message had

already been sent, and Jessica had already seen it.

Really? Someone I know?

Good night, Jessica. I typed before I put the phone on 'do not disturb'.

Paul had to be the one to tell her about the gala. They were as thick as thieves when we dated, and he'd brought her up all day despite our messy break up. He wanted us together because he listened to her side of things. I couldn't blame him. She was louder and talked much more. Little did Paul know that Jessica had a knack for manipulation and had no interest in a family beyond the benefits of marriage.

I sat there fuming, contemplating whether to call Paul and give him a piece of my mind or to leave it alone. It was late, he was probably with his wife, and the last thing I wanted to do was disturb them, but Paul needed to hear and respect my boundaries.

Slamming the laptop shut, I went to the kitchen for a drink and poured myself a glass of vodka. It probably wasn't the wisest idea considering the time, but I had to think of

someone for the gala. Since Jessica and Paul were still so close, it was a matter of time before she called and told him what I said, which meant he'd demand to know the person to look them up and make sure she'd 'fit in'.

Even if I wanted to take my comment back, even if I just wanted to send an apology check to the foundation of the gala, I was now stuck. I had to go and find *someone*.

This was the biggest event of the year, hosting celebrities and A-listers from all over the country. Not being invited would make a person look bad and being invited and not attending would look even worse. It was already being talked about, and although I didn't usually care about what the press had to say about me, I knew I needed to go for the sake of business.

I'd already dug my grave with my impulsive comment. Now I had to climb out of the hole by following through with a perfect date and a night dealing with people showing off their wealth, making connections, and watching with judgement at the ready.

Chapter 2

Lily

"Are we going to Brendan's party later? It's gonna be lit!" My best friend Cassie exclaimed as we walked toward my house.

"Definitely not something I want to do," I murmured as I walked my bicycle into the driveway of my two-bedroom house.

"Oh, come on, Lily. It's gonna be great, and I'm sure Brendan wants to see you," Cassie chimed as she wiggled her brows at me.

"Brendan and I are over. I don't really want to get the signals crossed here."

"Well, he's definitely not over you, so…" she shrugged. When I continued on my way, she ran up and jumped in front of me. "Please, let's forget Brendan for a second and just consider the fun we'll have."

"I don't know," I hesitated.

"How long has it been since we've gone

out and had a good time together? And now, since you're *totally* done with Brendan, it'll just be *us*."

I sighed heavily, wanting the conversation to be over with, but Cassie was persistent. "I'll think about it."

She jumped on her toes, grinning brightly and showing off the gap in her front teeth before she lunged into my arms and gave me a hug. "That's all I ask. Text me when you decide on 'yes'. I promised to help my mom with something, so I have to go. See you later?"

I scratched my head and nodded with a smile, watching the way Cassie's face lit up with even the hope of a yes. She rode off on her bike, and I sighed, trailing my fingers through my hair as I leaned my bicycle against a wall.

I moved toward the door and paused when I found it open. Mom was home early.

"Mom?" I called, kicking off my shoes and closing the door behind me. "The door was open."

"I'm here, honey," she called.

I found her in the kitchen, unpacking a bag with takeout boxes, and judging by the smell, I knew it had to be food from the Jamaican restaurant in town.

"Something smells great; Jamaican food?" I asked as I approached her, my eyes fastened on the boxes as she opened them up.

"Yeah, our favorite," she said as I looked over the oxtail, rice, and curried goat.

I licked my lips and looked at my mom. "Are we celebrating something?"

She turned to the fridge and popped out with two cans of soda without answering, but when she popped the tabs, I noticed the excited glint in her gaze. "Go wash your hands first, and then we can talk while we eat."

My heart fluttered, already feeding on Mom's excitement. I bounced to the bathroom to wash my hands and joined my mom around the table. She was still in her work clothes, so I knew she must have just gotten home. Which meant this news was important.

I reached for my plate and glanced at her. "So, tell me…"

“First, you tell me. How was the job hunting?”

“I sent out some applications and checked a few places, but everyone’s full right now. Tomorrow, I’ll check out a few more places,” I said as I scooped a spoonful of food into my mouth. “Now you, I can’t wait!”

“The craziest thing happened at work today,” my mom began, beaming as she paused; she loved building suspense.

“Yeah?” I scooted forward. “So?”

“Marisol quit today, and we had this huge job tomorrow, so guess what?”

My brows furrowed. “What?”

“I told my boss about you. Told him you’d be perfect. With my track record, it was an easy sell. He said you could accompany me to that job tomorrow afternoon,” she grinned, pride in her eyes.

I wanted to be happy; this was great news. I’d finally get some money in my hands and help with household bills. But there was still the gnawing fact that the job would be cleaning people’s houses, and while my mom

never complained, I knew she wanted better for me.

Not that I had a ton of options right now, and I'd seen the 'overdue' stamp on plenty of bills. Work was work, and we were getting to the point of desperation. I couldn't afford to be picky.

"That's great," I said, trying to match her excitement, but I saw the way the smile slowly fell from her face. I instantly felt guilty.

"I know you're meant for bigger things, pea, but this will just be for a while. You won't be trapped there forever. You're smart, and you'll find something better soon," she smiled as she reached for my hand.

I smiled and placed my other hand over hers. "I know, Mom, and thank you for vouching for me."

She blushed like she often did. "You're my daughter. Of course."

I took a deep breath and reached for my drink. Mom went on a limb for me, so I wasn't going to disappoint her. "So, where's the agency sending us?"

“It’s this rich guy’s place. Hopefully, he isn’t dirty and tips well. I’ll get the address tomorrow.”

I nodded. “I hope he isn’t a jerk. I’ve heard plenty about the terrible clients.”

She fanned me off playfully with a smile. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it. We’re getting paid at the end of the day, and that’s all that matters.”

I smiled as I took another bite of my food. Mom shuffled around the table and went to the island in the kitchen, where a small bag was. She dug into it and revealed a copy of her black uniform.

“This was the only size left, so I hope it fits,” she said as she handed me the clothes. “And this is your badge.” She held up the rectangular pin with my name and my title, ‘cleaner’. “Make sure you don’t lose it.”

“Well, it’s definitely a start,” I said as I stood and hugged my mom so she wouldn’t know how ambivalent I felt about this.

She hugged me back, and I clamped my lips together. It wasn’t that I was ungrateful. I was proud of my mom, and I’d worked with

her as a kid. It was more about what this meant. She'd sacrificed so much for me, and yet I'd ended up in the same spot. My dreams of becoming someone wealthy enough to provide for her seemed to be fading bit by bit.

This job was just one more thing I'd have to pay her back for. I'd have to use it as a launch point, an experience to move into a better position later and take care of her like she deserved.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," I said as I drew back and looked at her big, round, brown eyes.

"Oh, honey, I'm the one who'd be lost without you," she smiled, blinked a couple times, and glanced at the table. "Let's eat before the food gets cold."

***

I didn't know how long I lay in bed while thoughts raced through my head, but I was finally brought back to reality when my phone dinged beside me. I stared at the blank

ceiling for a while longer before I blindly scraped my phone from the bed and brought it to eye level. There was a message from Cassie.

So…? What's the verdict?

My brows furrowed in confusion before I finally remembered what she was talking about. The party. Of course.

"No" was still my first answer, but maybe I needed to let some steam off. After all, I really couldn't lay here for the next couple of hours thinking about my own failings. Maybe a little partying wouldn't be such a bad thing, although it was Brendan's. Hell, we didn't even have to see each other. Maybe he had another girlfriend by now and had forgotten me. High school felt like it was so far in the past.

How will we even get in? I texted back.

Would I be asking if I didn't have a plan?

I sighed. *Fine.*

Great, I'll pick you up in an hour. Wear something fun. There will be a pool.

I dropped the phone to my chest and squeezed my eyes shut. What was I doing?

Having fun, I answered myself. I was always worrying about my next step, my future. I always had something on my mind, and maybe tonight, I could clear all that noise with music and dancing.

Rolling off the bed, I went to my closet and rummaged through for something 'fun' to wear. I had a ton of shorts and blouses, but I wanted something that paired well together. Cassie would be mad if I didn't live up the moment with a perfect 'party' outfit.

With a groan, I pulled out denim shorts and a white crop top, which had just slightly more coverage than a bra and a fun, half-there back. I flung them to the bed without a second thought and headed for the shower.

Mom was in my room when I went back. Her eyes traveled from the clothes on the bed and then back to me. I continued to rub my hair with a towel as I fished for something to say.

"You didn't tell me you were going out," she said as she raised a brow.

"It's just a stupid party that Cassie wanted me to follow her to." I finished with

the towel and sighed.

"You don't like parties, Pea," she said.

"I don't, but now I have something to celebrate," I said with a wider smile than I'd managed at dinner.

She nodded, but worry touched her eyes. "True, but promise me you won't get drunk. We have work at twelve tomorrow, and I want you to have the best first day possible."

I took her hands gently. "Of course. Mom, you know me. I never get wild. I'm the rock that keeps Cassie safe."

She squeezed my hands. "I know. Worrying is a mom thing."

"Don't worry about me, okay. You should be in bed getting some rest. After all your work, you deserve some relaxation."

She stood up and caressed my cheeks. "You're right; I am tired. Have fun, and don't stay out too late, okay?"

"Okay."

She kissed my cheek before she left the room. I stared after her for a moment, wondering if I should stay, but I knew Cassie

would never let me hear the end of it if I flaked on her now.

Just as I was done getting dressed and primping, my phone buzzed. It had to be Cassie. I picked it up, then reached for a tube of lip gloss.

"Hey."

"I'm pulling up in five. Are you ready?" She asked.

"Yeah, just about."

"You don't sound very excited." Her pout was obvious, even over the phone.

"I am. I just have a lot on my mind. Meet you outside."

I grabbed my purse, then left the room. I peeked into Mom's room and found her all balled up in the sheets in bed watching TV. A big part of me wanted to join her. We could just watch movies all night, talking and cuddling. The thought was so tempting I didn't take even one step into her room. I smiled and waved from where I was.

"I'm heading out now."

"Okay, Lily. Don't stay out too late."

“Okay, Mom. Bye, love you,” I called as I continued to the door.

“I love you, too, honey!”

A car pulled up outside, and I hurried to the front door, grabbing the keys from a bowl on the entry table. Something else caught my eye there. Mail. I picked one up and wasn’t surprised at my findings– just a little sad. It was the bank, which meant it had to be about the mortgage on the house.

I shook off the nearly oppressive anxiety and dropped the letter. I was working now. Two incomes could cover all the bills. That was the whole point of celebrating tonight.

Cassie was right out front, blasting music from the car’s radio as she waved to me. I couldn’t help but smile as I closed the door behind me and stuffed the keys into my purse.

I hopped in and was wrapped up in Cassie’s overwhelming perfume, which had me wiggling my nose a little. I wound down my window and took a whiff of fresh air as she drove off.

“Ugh, I’m so happy you decided to come. I promise, it’s gonna be worth it!” She

squealed, going a bit faster.

"I hope so. I could really do with some de-stressing right now," I said as I flopped back in my seat.

"Everything okay?" she asked as she turned the volume down a notch.

My lips parted to tell her what was going on, but then I reached forward and turned the music back up. No need to worry her with my own issues, right?

"Don't worry about me. Tonight, we're gonna have some fun!" I yelled over the music.

Cassie's smile glistened as she squealed, and she pressed harder on the gas. Normally, I'd beg her to slow down, but tonight, I decided to let her enjoy everything. Before now, I always planned ahead and always tried to be responsible and level-headed. That was all a waste. I'd always worried, planned and shut out the impulsive side of life and for what? I'd ended up as a college dropout and a newly aproned maid.

That meant I didn't need to overthink tonight. I just had to show some restraint with drinking

and be wide awake tomorrow.

We sang to the music until we were at Brendan's gate. I'd only been here once, and it was on prom night when he snuck us in to have sex. I'd gotten into the house, but Brendan hadn't gotten into me, and, according to Brendan, that was grounds for breaking up.

Even with that unpleasant memory, I couldn't believe I'd forgotten the size of this place. It was huge and strikingly white, with the yellow lights adding some much-needed warmth to the home.

The kind of place I'll be cleaning instead of buying for my mom, I thought sadly before shaking my head.

We parked on the crowded lawn, and I got out, hugging my shoulders when the night's air nipped my skin. How had I forgotten a jacket?

Cassie grabbed my hand and pulled me along as I stumbled behind to catch up. The gate was already crowded and closed off, two burly security guards checking IDs with a list in hand, creating a choke point for the eager people who were already in party mode.

My brows furrowed. “Wha– I didn’t bring my ID.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Lily,” she said, still holding onto my hand, craning her neck over the cluster of people to see over the gate.

She spotted a guy and waved, a huge smile on her face, before she glanced at me. “Your girl here has connections.”

She pushed her way through the small pile gathered at the front, not caring who she pissed off in the process. I had to bear the brunt of the murmurs and the curses as I burrowed through with an awkward smile.

When we reached the front, the two guys looked at us, unimpressed, but luckily, a guy who I assumed was Cassie’s friend showed up at the gate.

“Let them in, guys.”

Cassie beamed as the men opened the gate and granted us entry.

“Thanks, Noah,” she said to the tall guy, who just couldn’t take his eyes off her. Their gazes held, and the growing warmth between

them proved I was in the middle of something I shouldn't be involved in.

I cleared my throat, and Cassie snapped out of it. "Oh, Noah, this is Lily, my best friend. Lily, Noah – we have a few classes together."

I smiled, reaching out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

He took my hand and gave it a gentle shake. "Nice to finally meet you. Cassie talks about you all the time."

Pity I couldn't say the same about him. Cassie giggled and took his free hand. "Oh, shush, we don't want that going to her head."

I grinned. "Too late."

Both chuckled before Noah started to lead the way. "Party's this way. What are you girls drinking?"

"Oh, we're not really picky," Cassie said nonchalantly. I flashed her a glance, and she widened her eyes at me, telling me to go along with it.

"Ohh, I like that. There's a bar out back by the pool. You can get whatever you want,"

he turned and glanced at the two of us before stepping inside the mansion.

The music got incredibly louder, and despite the air conditioner seeping through, the warmth in the house was unavoidable. The huge foyer was already filled with people, and so were both staircases leading to either wing of the house.

As I looked around, I wondered if we were late, considering some people were already bat-shit drunk while others looked like they were going to pass out. Parts of the white walls were stained with alcohol and food, and the floor was littered with cups and bottles.

Brendan's parents *had* to be out of town.

We went to the pool area, which was just as packed despite how big his backyard was. People were in the large circular pool, some in the Jacuzzi, while some lounged in chairs and made out in dark corners. Anywhere I looked, there were people. Compared to the sheer number of people moving, talking, and getting it on, the bar looked nearly empty. Maybe I just needed some help getting into the partying mood. Just

one drink.

We waited in turn while the others got their drink. I bobbed my head to the music playing and looked around the place, still dreading the idea of bumping into Brendan.

"What are you having?" Cassie asked as she glanced at me.

"Beer is fine," I shrugged. I was glad when I didn't get a rebuttal, and before I knew it, she was shoving a bottle in my hand.

"Hey, guys, I'll be back, okay?" Noah said, and we both nodded, watching him move towards the house.

I glanced at Cassie and raised a brow. "How am I just now finding out about this Noah?"

She bit her lip and glanced back in the direction he went. "He's not my boyfriend or anything like that. We just like each other."

Cassie had never minded the grey area, but she usually told me about the guys she was into. I didn't believe her 'whatever' attitude for a second. "Uh-huh. You just like him."

Her cheeks grew flushed. “I swear, but he’s hot, isn’t he?”

“He seems cool,” I reassured.

Cassie beamed. “You’ll love him. Just wait until he comes back, and then you’ll-”

Water rained down on us, making us both gasp. Someone landed a cannonball, earning a series of shouts and cheers. With the first person setting the standard, more people jumped in, splashing us again.

Cassie was beaming, her brown eyes sparkling as she looked at the pool like she’d never seen one.

She glanced at me, her lips parted with a smile and her eyes wide. “Wanna give it a go?”

“Absolutely not!” I immediately declined as I backed away from the pool and went to stand behind a chair.

“Oh, come on! It looks so fun. Plus, the water is warm!”

I frowned and shook my head. “I’m not stopping you. If you want to, go right ahead.”

“It’ll be more fun if it’s both of us,” she

insists, tugging on my hand.

"I've got a beer and no swimsuit. I'm drinking," I giggle.

She glanced over, then did a double take, her smile widening. My eyes followed the path of her gaze, and I soon realized it was Noah.

"Hey, wanna take the plunge?" She called over the music as he approached.

"That's my girl!" He answered while peeling off his shirt, his cup hanging between his teeth.

Cassie squealed a little and shoved her beer in my hand before I could remind her that she didn't have a bikini either. Noah came up to us, took a hearty gulp of his drink and grabbed Cassie's hand. They launched themselves into the water.

I couldn't help but laugh when she came back up, breathing heavily and wiping her face. She glanced at me and waved. She and Noah played around, dunking each other like kids.

Rather than joining, I found an empty

chair and kept watch. *I'm the rock*, I reminded myself as I took a sip of my own beer. I could have fun without starting a list of things I'd regret in the morning.

I took another sip of my beer and, for a second, I wished I was as spontaneous and outgoing as Cassie, who loved the idea of taking risks. On the other hand, I felt the weight of every choice. I wondered how each decision would affect my mom. I worried about the bills piling up. I worried about my future and what it would look like years from now. Maybe once everything was settled, I could let go like my best friend. Maybe then it wouldn't be a luxury.

A shadow fell over me, dragging me from my thoughts.

I squinted, looked up and saw Brendan standing in front of me, a huge smile on his face. "Lily?"

I managed a polite smile, helped by a long swig of beer. "Hey."

Chapter 3

Lily

While I hadn't been avoiding Brendan, I'd hoped I could avoid him. My heart plummeted a little as he lingered for more than a hello. I shouldn't have expected him to keep his distance.

We texted on Instagram occasionally, recycled messages of him saying he'd like another chance in my life. The answer was always no, but then we'd catch up for a bit, let the conversation die, and he'd pick it up the next month. I'd considered blocking him every time, but somehow, I could never bring myself to do it. Maybe I liked the routine of it.

I sat up in the chair a little and cleared my throat as he took a seat beside me. He looked the same as he had in high school, but now he had stubble and a sharp jawline. He'd even grown out his curly dark hair. Sure, he looked like a movie star, but I remembered

how easily he'd said we were done when I couldn't get naked with him. He'd rebounded and was more than happy to show off everything and anything he had.

I couldn't remember why I'd ever been interested in him.

"What a nice surprise. I didn't know you were coming." His eyes traveled across my face, briefly lingering on my cleavage.

"Yeah, it was a last-minute thing. Cassie really wanted to," I said as my eyes shifted to her and Noah in the pool.

He followed my gaze, but just for a moment. Brendan's forehead wrinkled. "Shoot, you guys know Noah?"

"Cassie does. I met him tonight."

He nodded slowly. "Well, you should have told me you were coming. I would have come pick you up myself."

"We managed just fine," I assured him before taking another drink.

"You look great, by the way. I mean, you were super-hot in high school, but…" he trailed off as he took the opportunity to give

me another once-over. “Damn.”

“Thanks,” I made myself say the word, even if it felt wrong.

“Seeing you in person after such a long time makes me want to try and up my game a little more. I mean, Instagram texts are one thing, but now I feel more optimistic.”

“Brendan, nothing’s changed. It’s still a no.”

His smile fell slightly, but then it was back up in the next second.

“Okay, what if I prove to you that I can be a better guy than I was the last time we dated?” He asked, breath smelling like a mixture of alcohol and fruit.

“We don’t work,” I said clearly.

“Come on, you can’t know that.”

“Based on this party, you’re the same. You like fun, showing off, and living a flashy lifestyle, while I prefer calm nights, enjoy simple things, and prefer having plans. You like multiple partners, and I prefer one — should I continue?” I pointed out.

He scoffed and shook his head. “All that

can change. *I* can change. You're the only girl that has stayed on my mind for more than a few weeks. It's been years. That proves I'm serious about at least one thing."

I scratched my head, not knowing what to say. He had a silver tongue, which he'd had for as long as I could remember, and he turned even simple conversations into seduction. If I wasn't careful, he'd suck me in again, but how could I disengage and stay at the party for Cassie?

"You're perfect, you're worth it. Let me earn you," he said, reaching out to touch my hand.

I paused to look at him before I busted out laughing. The confusion on his face made it even funnier. Jeeze, he couldn't even come up with his own lines?

"I know you're not sitting here quoting a *Weeknd* song to me," I said between laughs.

His lips parted in defense, but then he clamped them back shut and shrugged. "It's a good song."

I shook my head and drank the last of my beer. "You can waste your breath on me

all night, but my answer will still be no. You're happy living this life while it took Cassie begging to get me here for one night."

He sighed heavily and rubbed the nape of his neck. "Fine, I'll ease off on the relationship idea, but we can be friends, right?"

"I guess I'm fine with being friends."

He smiled and nodded proudly. "So, are you single?"

I flashed him a firm look.

"Hey, I'm just asking. Us being friends and all."

I took another long drink. "That doesn't matter between *new* friends."

He considered that then glanced at the pool. "Either way, let's get in and really have fun."

"Oh no. I already said no to Cassie."

He stood and stretched out a hand. "Oh, come on, it'll be fun. You came to a party, didn't you? Not a book club."

I held up my beer. "Hence why I'm drinking."

“Come on,” he turned to the crowd. “Lily, Lily, Lily!”

When people realized who was chanting my name, they all joined, and before I knew it, I was in a spotlight I’d never wanted. Brendan gave me a victorious smile. “It’s not just me that wants you in the pool.”

“Come on, Lily! In here feels like heaven!” Cassie shouted from the shallow end.

“You only live once, right?” Brendan insisted.

The pressure was already too much. I could walk away or jump in once and be done. It was a pretty easy choice since me leaving would give Brendan the opportunity to get me alone.

I placed the empty beer bottle on the floor and held his hand as I stood. His smile widened, and in the next second, we were running towards the pool.

“Cannonball!” Brendan shouted before we hit the water.

I sunk to the bottom of the deep pool, the muffled sounds of the music and cheers in

the distance. It was peaceful, freeing. I stayed down longer, embracing it, until my lungs demanded air. I swam to the surface and popped up, pushing my hair away from my face.

Cassie, Brendan, and Noah were all there waiting for me, huge smiles on their faces and just as soaked as I was.

"Well, I have to admit, that was fun," I confessed.

Cassie lunged forward and hugged me. "Told you. I'm glad Brendan could talk some sense into you."

I grinned. "Sure."

"I'm having another one of these parties next weekend but more on the DL – less people, more drinks," Brendan said as he signaled a bartender for more beverages.

"Where are your parents anyway? How are you having all these parties here?" I asked.

"Oh, they're not here most weekends, and next weekend, they have this charity thing, so I'll have the house to myself again," he shrugged.

“How do you clean up this mess in time?” Cassie asked.

“We have maids. I just tip them a little extra to be efficient and quiet about it,” he shrugged casually.

There was a small silence that I felt awkwardness sneak into the silence. Cassie looked away, but soon, the drinks came, and we got back to chatting and drinking like before.

I took a gulp and decided to make the best of the night.

***

As it got later, fewer people were left conscious at the party. Cassie and Noah had gone off somewhere while I sat at the edge of the pool, swishing my feet through the water and trying to fish out an empty cup floating around.

The music had gone down, and for the first time in a few hours, I could actually hear myself think. It was past midnight, and I knew

I should be heading home, but it felt good to just be. After all, that job wasn't until midday tomorrow and sleeping in wouldn't affect anything at all.

"You're for sure not a lightweight," Brendan said from behind me, and I couldn't help my small smile as I glanced at the half-done bottle of beer in my hand. I'd lost track of how many drinks I'd turned down.

"I guess," I said.

Brendan sat beside me in a drier shirt than he had been in earlier. His musky cologne was faint, but the alcohol on him wasn't.

"I'm surprised you're still here," he said.

I shrugged. "I'm waiting on Cassie wherever she is."

Brendan snorted. "I'm sure she's cuddled up with Noah somewhere. I could take you home if you want, or there's tons of rooms upstairs if you're not up for a ride."

I turned, and our gazes met. My first thought was to look away, but I didn't. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of calling me

shy or something.

Brendan's head moved closer to mine, and soon, I could feel his warm breath against my face and read what he was angling for. I drew back a bit, but he just grinned and leaned in closer.

Just as my lips were inches away from touching his, something flashed, and I immediately pulled back to see what it was. A guy in front of us had a camera, and my cheeks grew heated right away. Brendan laughed and fanned the guy off, sending him on his way.

"Sorry about that; I hired a photographer for the party," he explained, his eyes glued to my lips once more.

I cleared my throat and pinned a few tendrils of my drying hair behind my ear. I wasn't just angry about the photographer. How had I let myself get so off track here? I freed my hand from Brendan's.

"I should try and find Cassie," I said as I got up.

"Lily!" he called, quickly getting up. I didn't stop as I continued my walk towards the

house.

“Come on, Lily; things were going great a second ago!” he called.

I stopped short and turned to him. “Friends?”

His shoulders dropped in defeat. He was hesitant before he nodded and raked his hands through his hair. “Sure. Friends.”

Cassie appeared from around a corner with Noah in tow, giggling hard with a blush on her face. Her hair was slightly tousled and her shorts loose. They came to a sudden halt when they saw us. Cassie looked like she’d been caught doing something bad, while Noah looked proud.

“Hey!” Cassie greeted. “I was just coming to look for you.”

I forced a smile. “Ready?”

“Just about,” she said and blushed at Noah. “I’ll call you?”

“Please do,” he grinned.

“I’ll see you around,” I said to Brendan, then turned to Noah. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You, too. Drive safely,” he said to Cassie before placing a kiss on her cheek.

When we got to the car, Cassie was still smiling. At least she’d had the amazing time she’d hoped for, even though we didn’t get the together time she’d promised. I hopped into the passenger’s side and shook my head.

“You couldn’t be more obvious,” I said as I made myself comfortable.

Her head snapped towards me. “What?”

“You guys fucked, didn’t you?”

Her lips quivered as she started the ignition. I could see her trying to hold back her smile, but it couldn’t be contained. Cassie would be terrible at poker. She couldn’t hide a single emotion.

“God, it was spectacular,” she gushed.

“At a party, though?” I scolded.

She rolled her eyes. “It was in one of the bedrooms upstairs, and we could barely hear what was happening in the party. It was like a hotel room.”

“I thought you just liked each other,” I said with a raised brow.

“Listen, you don’t get to be all judge-y just because you’re a virgin. I promise, when you finally pop that cherry, you’ll want to do it every chance you get,” she said.

I pulled in a breath. “Yeah, right.”

“I swear to you. Sex is amazing, Lily. Maybe you should have taken the chance with Brendan; I saw the way he was looking at you.” She turned to me with a grin on her face.

I snorted. “You know Brendan is a dog. I don’t need that type of partner.”

She paused for a moment. “I wish I could give you shit for that, but you’re right. You want the romance, and I won’t judge you for that. Even if the perfect man doesn’t exist and orgasms are better than butterflies.”

Cassie kept talking about how much easier it was to get the virginity nerves out of the way before being with the ‘right one’ and how I should at least try to put myself out there. It worked for her, but that wasn’t how I wanted to do things.

I wanted a special first. She wanted a special final.

Chapter 4

Lily

I rolled away from the tugging on my shoulder, clinging to my pillow like I was trying to cling to sleep. When I was jerked onto my back, I cracked my eyes with a groan and found my mom standing over me. The sunlight nearly blinded me. Sunlight?! I jumped up with a gasp, suddenly wide awake.

"Shit," I exclaimed, looking around the room frantically for my phone. I heard a thunk when I lifted my blanket and knew it was lost to the floor. "What time is it?"

"You have an hour to get ready," my mom said as I slithered half out of bed after my phone. I tapped the screen. It was just a few minutes past ten.

I sighed and scratched my head. "Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

"You looked like you needed the rest; don't worry, we won't be late, but you should

get a move on."

I sighed heavily and rubbed my forehead, flopping down on the bed. A small headache started to thrum at my temples, and I hoped it was just from the sudden wake up call and not the alcohol last night. The last thing I needed was a hangover on my first day.

"I made breakfast, and there's coffee in the pot, too," Mom informed.

"Thanks, Mom," I smiled. "I should shower first."

My mom nodded and then she left the room. I quickly made the bed and left for the bathroom, where the hot water from the shower washed away everything from last night and the light headache. I felt fresh and renewed when I came out and smiled when I saw that my mom had placed my uniform on the bed.

Black pants and a matching buttoned-down blouse with the company's logo on the left shirt pocket waited for me. Bundling my hair on the top of my head, I got dressed and stood in front of my floor-length mirror five

minutes later, staring at myself. I stared at the hair piled on top of my head and decided to leave it like that. The uniform was a bit snug over my chest and across my butt. It wasn't perfect, but I wasn't about to tear through the fabric.

My mom came into the room and smiled when she saw me standing there. A proud look spread over her face as she came up behind me and held me by the shoulders. We stood in the mirror together, and I traced the similarities between us. The same dark hair, the same dark eyes, the same nose. And now the same career.

I had to work to keep my smile in place at that reminder. She deserved more, and I'd always promised to give it to her.

"Beautiful," she said as she pressed her head against mine. "I promise, Lily, this won't be your story," she said softly as her eyes watered. She patted my shoulder and drew back.

I swallowed the lump that formed in my throat at her words. I felt the shame rolling off her, and that weight fell on my shoulder. I

turned to correct her, but she continued. “You’re destined to be great; this is only temporary.”

Stroking over her cheek, I smiled honestly. “Don’t worry about me, Mom. I swear, you won’t be doing this forever either. I’m going to make you proud, and then I’m going to take you out of here and give you the best life.”

Her dark eyes pooled with tears, and her lips quivered as she smiled. “You make me proud every day, pea.”

I hugged her and snapped my eyes tightly shut to stop myself from crying. We stayed there for about a minute before we pulled apart and went downstairs to have breakfast.

***

Half an hour later, we were on our way to the client after picking up the supplies from the agency.

“So, who’s the client anyway?” I asked.

“Mr. Reid. I don’t remember his first name. It’s on a piece of paper somewhere in my bag. I don’t know him, but some of the women at the agency said he’s popular.”

“Hmmm, well, he’s living at the Wiltshire. You have to be rich to afford that place,” I said.

“Either way, it has nothing to do with us. We’re going to do the job, and then we’re out.”

“Will he be there?” I asked.

“That doesn’t matter. Just stay focused on cleaning and stay out of his way if he’s in,” she advised.

I nodded with a sigh as I endured the rest of the drive with anticipation and a slight bit of dread. Cleaning houses wasn’t what I’d envisioned myself doing up to a year ago, but I’d do anything to help out my mom.

I just hoped there wouldn’t be any surprises since I’d often heard the horror stories of cleaning. Plus, snobby rich people weren’t always pleasant to work with. I wondered if this was something like what Brendan had spoken about.

Did this man host a party and want an extra clean up team, just like Brendan? I hoped not, but I tried to keep myself smiling. There was no turning back now.

***

The building was ... a lot, even from the outside. It was well secured, and as I looked around at the cars there, I realized my mom's 2003 silver Prius was the most outdated vehicle in the lot. It was just as out of place as we were.

We got the supplies from the trunk and entered the building, walking across the gleaming marble floor that reflected us perfectly. The space was well air-conditioned and unmistakably clean – it even *smelled* clean, not like wood or perfume or air freshener, just clean. The expansive space didn't have many people. At the center of it all was a stylish concierge desk in the heart of the lobby, tended to by a tall male dressed in a jacket and tie.

He greeted us with a polite smile as

soon as he saw us and treated us with the utmost professionalism. While my mom spoke to him, my eyes continued to scan my surroundings, taking note of the large abstract artwork that decorated the cream walls. There were a few sculptures placed on large pedestals, adding to the feeling of opulence that already radiated the air. A few people were seated, some at the bar further ahead – all undoubtedly high-classed.

"Let's go, Lily," my mom said, pulling me from my trance.

I followed her to a polished elevator that we boarded. Soft jazz music played through the speakers, proving that even the fanciest elevators had the same music.

As soon as I stepped out into the entryway of the apartment, I was met with an even colder air conditioner. I rubbed my shoulders and stepped further inside the place, my eyes taking a tour as I went along.

The floors were the same marble as downstairs, but the walls were stark white with a few random pieces of line art decorating them. There were hanging ceiling

lights that added a little warmth to the area and pieces of furniture that looked brand new. Everything was in place and clean. What was there for us to do here?

"Mom, are you sure we're at the right place?" I asked.

"Yeah, the receptionist confirmed. Jackson Reid."

I paused when I heard the name and turned to my mom with wide eyes. "We're in Jackson Reid's apartment?"

Her brows furrowed. "Do you know him?"

"OMG, Mom, you use his face products every day. He owns '*Lumineer*'."

Her mouth fell open. "Wow, really?"

"Yes! This is insane!" I exclaimed as my eyes continued to wander around the apartment. Of course, this was the apartment for a type of man like Jackson. Cool, composed, well-organized and wealthy.

"Well, we'd better get started," she said calmly.

I couldn't believe she didn't care that we

were in *Jackson Reid's* house. Then again, cleaning was cleaning, I guessed. It didn't matter who it was for; it was always the same, and it wouldn't change anything for us.

That didn't stop my curiosity, though. How many people could say they'd been in his house?

I quickly caught up to her and ended up in his bedroom with the huge king-sized bed in the middle with its cushioned headboard. I didn't bother looking at anything else after seeing the sliding glass doors. I was in awe as I walked around and came onto the balcony with the glass rails overlooking the city. I could see everything. It was a full and beautiful view of the city that simply took my breath away.

"Come on, Pea. We should start working," my mom called. She had her hands on her hips, gloves on with her brows raised at me.

Right. Right. A job, not a holiday.

"You can start dusting, and I'll start with the master bathroom," she decided.

I nodded as I took the duster and started

the task, wondering what was really here to clean. The place was already spotless, but nevertheless, I went over everything thoroughly and efficiently.

As I went through the house, the excitement of being *here* wore off. It was just another place to clean, and I was only happy it didn't look like the house I left last night.

I allowed myself a second to check my phone half an hour later. I realized there was a message from Brendan in the notification bar, and just as I was about to check…

"Who are you?" a deep, masculine voice asked.

The low tone, soft and refined like an expensive wine, sent my heart galloping in my chest. My lips parted, and as I turned to confirm who it was, I realized he was closer to me than I thought.

This was Jackson Reid. Up close.

Holy hell.

Chapter 5

Jackson

I'd decided to leave work early today, hit the gym and find a proper date for the charity gala this weekend. I didn't remember the cleaners were scheduled to come until I was reminded at the front desk upon arrival.

Regardless, I'd gotten on the elevator without a single concern. This was a new cleaning agency I'd decided to try since the last one had sent someone more interested in my status than getting the actual job done. There wasn't an ounce of professionalism, and so I opted for another option.

This one was a bit more local and was based in the neighborhood I grew up in. Paul warned me they could be worse than the company he recommended, but I had gone along with it, nonetheless.

As soon as I stepped inside my penthouse, I could smell the freshness of

cleaning products. I wandered further inside and saw someone standing on her phone. I didn't need to see her face to know she was young. Her body was petite, yet shapely in clothes that were questionable – maybe too tight to count as professional. Her brown hair was piled on the top of her head, a few loose strands fanning her slender neck.

Surely cleaners didn't dress like this?

"Who are you?" I asked, watching as she stiffened.

But then she slowly turned to me, shoving her phone in her pocket, her lips slightly parted as she fished for words.

All of a sudden, who she was didn't matter; I was at a loss for words at her beauty. Her face was the perfect oval shape with huge dark eyes that almost made her look like something out of a fairytale. Her nose was slender, her lips full, even if her top lip was bigger than the bottom.

"Er, I'm Lily from *Cleaning Queens*." She pointed at the logo on her shirt pocket. "I was just checking my messages," she said, looking embarrassed.

So, she was a cleaner, but she couldn't be more than what – twenty-one? What was she doing with a job like this when she had her whole life ahead of her?

"Ah, Mr. Reid, a pleasure to meet you," another voice greeted. A woman stepped forward with a striking resemblance to the younger one in front of me. They had to be related.

"This is my daughter, Lily. I'm Gianna," she said as she pulled off her gloves and stretched out her hand.

I gave it a firm shake before I looked back at the daughter, who still looked nervous, glancing towards Gianna as if I were going to tattle on her.

"Pleasure to meet you," I said with a brief smile. "Please pretend like I'm not here. I'll be heading to the gym in the next room."

Lily smiled, a faint dimple popping up on the left side of her cheek. Enchanting and innocent, interesting. I gave a curt nod and changed into something more comfortable in my closet. After my pre-workout shake, I started the treadmill.

My mind still ran circles around Lily. Recognition had flashed across her beautiful face, but I was more interested in how she'd reacted. As if I was only a threat, not some rich prince that could save her, Cinderella style.

It was refreshing.

Did she *want* to be a cleaner? To move up in the company and take over, or was this a job born from necessity? Maybe she was paying her way through college to avoid debt.

She'd need to if her mother was also a house cleaner, but it was nice to see some sense of ownership. She didn't want debt, was willing to work, and didn't immediately turn on the charm, even though she recognized me.

Some minutes into my workout, I caught a glimpse of her as she walked by in the other room. The glass walls were a blessing at the moment. I'd get to see who she really was, if she snooped, if she was texting people about me, showing them my home.

Lily adjusted her earphones, then wiped down furniture. She paid careful attention to everything. Once she finished the furniture,

she vacuumed. My eyes remained fixed on her as she worked, not wanting to make her uncomfortable but also determined to know who I was allowing in my home.

She didn't text. She didn't fawn over the expensive pieces of furniture or the gorgeous carpets. She was just focused on the job even as she shook her hips a bit to the music.

Lily was so small and slender, yet curvy. Her breasts seemed small, but her ass was incredible. The uniform she wore shouldn't have been appealing, but it stretched over her curves, teasing me with the view.

I'd always had a thing for petite girls. I liked the idea of being able to pick them up, being able to define the power dynamic, and – when the time came, like it always did – they were easier to crop out of photos.

I lowered the speed on the treadmill and cleared my throat, trying to snap myself out of whatever fascination this was. Normally, I'd check out while having cleaners here or find a reason to be gone to avoid the awkwardness, but the fact she was so focused, so damn attractive, and completely ignoring me caught

my attention.

No, I didn't need to fuck the first attractive girl I saw. Just because it had been a while didn't mean I needed to throw her down, and I certainly didn't need the complications of a fling.

So, I turned my focus back to the workout, and the podcast one of my business competitors had collaborated on.

I was in the middle of doing some weights when a small knock came at the door. I almost didn't hear it, but then my eyes caught a glimpse of the small figure at the door, and I realized it was Lily.

I quickly placed the weights down and stood, swinging a towel over my shoulders as I gave her my attention. She didn't say anything right away – just stared in a way that justified my staring earlier. I took note of how her dark brown eyes quickly roamed my frame, traveling over every inch of my body before her gaze settled once again on my face.

As if she'd been caught doing something she wasn't supposed to, her cheeks ripened with a blush, and she swallowed visibly.

“Oh, um, we’re about to leave – my mom and I,” she said, standing there with her shoulders forced back as if she were embodying what she’d seen other professionals do.

I only nodded, our gazes locking as we stared at each other. Raw lust sizzled through my body, and I took a step forward. She took an unsteady breath, and I was sure that she felt it, too, the white-hot desire that kept the air between us heavy with tension.

“Mr. Reid, we’re done for today. Is there anything else you’d like us to do?” The girl’s mother appeared, her cleaning supplies in hand.

Refocusing on the moment at hand, I inhaled through my nose and slowly exhaled. This was just stress and sexual frustration, nothing else.

“One moment,” I said as I left for the other room to grab my wallet.

The full payment would be made through the agency online, but I felt compelled to leave a tip. It tended to help keep people quiet and create a relationship

that wouldn't be abused as easily. I returned and handed a hundred dollars each to them; they stiffened, their mouths partially opened as they looked at each other.

"Thank you," I said as I stretched my hand further out for them to take it. "I value professionalism and efficiency."

"Oh, Mr. Reid, we couldn't…" Gianna said before she trailed off. Her eyes were fixed on the bill in her hand. I knew she wanted to take it, but I understood this was beyond the normal tip.

It was over the top and maybe offensive to her pride, but I wasn't a man who backed down from showing appreciation.

"Please, I insist," I pressed.

Gianna finally accepted it, but Lily hesitated as if she were agreeing to something without having read the fine print. After a drawn-out moment, she shoved the bill in her pocket.

"Thank you," she said as a faint smile played at her gorgeous lips.

"Thank you so much, Sir," Gianna said

warmly. “I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day.”

“You as well,” I bid, motioning towards the elevator to end this admittedly awkward moment.

I followed them to the elevator and watched as they stepped inside. Gianna gave a small wave while Lily kept her eyes on my shoes. At the last minute, Lily’s eyes, now brightened in the light so I could make out the gold strands among the deep brown met mine. Lily’s beautiful face was the last thing I saw before the steel doors closed.

This was definitely a better cleaning crew, based on professionalism alone. Of course, Lily’s looks didn’t hurt either.

My cell phone rang in the next room, reminding me that a billionaire like me actually had to work to keep his business running and his bank account full. I sighed when I realized it was Paul. I’d rushed here for nothing.

“Yes?” I asked.

“I went to your office, you weren’t there … what’s happening?” he asked rather

dramatically.

"I wanted to clear my head, so I came home and hit the gym," I said as I walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"That's unlike you. Everything okay?"

I scratched my head and leaned against the sink. "Everything's fine."

"Good … good." There was a small silence on Paul's end. "So, I spoke to Jessica. Imagine my surprise when she told me you said you already have a date for the gala."

I pulled in a breath. News travels too fast. "I didn't know you discussed me with Jessica."

"Jessica and I are still friends, Jackson. We talked, and you just happened to come up. Now, who's this date you have, and why am I the last to know?"

I contemplated telling Paul the truth, but then that would get back to Jessica, or Paul would want to convince me yet again that Jessica was the person to bring. I didn't want to talk badly about Jessica, and I knew Paul wouldn't listen to my tone, wouldn't

listen to what I said; he was too sure that Jessica and I would be perfect for each other.

For now, it was better to go with a lie. It was the lesser of the current evils.

"I'll tell you all about it when I see you."

"Come on, man, don't leave me on a cliffhanger here. I need to know everything," he insisted.

"And in time, you will. Goodbye."

Before Paul could utter another word, I disconnected the call and put the phone on do not disturb. I needed to think about how I would make this happen. I needed to find someone fast before Paul did the hunting for me. I didn't need a media-hungry, gold-digging, attention-seeking woman at my side come this weekend, and that was exactly the type of woman Paul would choose.

Two hours later, still blank and feeling a tad bit desperate, I went to the kitchen for a strong drink. As I sat there with my drink in hand, my gaze dropped to the glistening countertops and the items that had been neatly arranged and stacked – organized but

done in a way that nothing seemed lost.

Lily. The cleaner. The woman who had been in my apartment just a few hours ago. For a minute, I considered going to the gala with her, having her by my side, looking lovelier than ever. I knew she would steal the attention of everyone there without drooling over me.

But she was a stranger, and this had to be handled rationally. It would solve my problem, but if she said the wrong thing, didn't know how to behave, believed people like Jessica, it could destroy her and me.

Still, she'd been composed today, she clearly needed money, and I could take care of that, plus, some exposure might help get her out of this line of work. It would help us both.

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted it to happen. Twenty minutes later, I was still circling the same train of thought, an impulsive, reckless thought that hadn't been peer reviewed or researched.

I wanted Lily to be my fake date. A complete stranger, one I hadn't even managed a full conversation with, but she was the only

person I could picture. Feeling a sense of rejuvenation, I reached for my phone and dialed my assistant's number, telling her to get in contact with the cleaning company so I could get some necessary information.

This was going to happen. As crazy as it sounded, it was still the lesser of two evils. Lily couldn't do worse to me than Jessica.

Chapter 6

Lily

That evening, I sat on my small porch, eating a sandwich we had gotten on our way back from Jackson Reid's apartment. I should have been wrapped up in thoughts about him. He was a celebrity, and I'd actually gotten to meet him in person, but I was just ... tired.

I'd been expecting the worst cleaning job ever. The rich people were sometimes snobbish and demanding, my mother had told me plenty. I'd expected nothing less when Jackson Reid made an appearance at his apartment.

Sure, the apartment hadn't been much work comparatively, but I was exhausted.

As I chewed, my mind rolled back to seeing him right there in front of me. When he had caught me standing there on my phone, I'd expected a scolding but had gotten nothing of the sort. Instead, I'd found myself taken

aback by how handsome and flawless he was in person.

Impossibly perfect, put together, every detail of his outfit and self a choice compared to happenstance.

Of course, his attractive features couldn't be mistaken on or off screen, but Jackson Reid had stood there like an actual God with flawlessly smooth skin, thick healthy dark hair and ash-gray eyes.

He was the panty-dropping kind of man and had created a reputation of being such – no surprise there. I could still see every bulky muscle as he lifted those weights, his tank top exposing a bit of his taut pecs and iron-clad chest. His skin had glistened with sweat, and his hair, which had been neatly combed a few minutes earlier, had been mussed up a little, a damp little lock falling to his forehead.

I didn't think there would ever be a time when I could forget that image or how our eyes locked when he had seen me standing there. My entire body had buzzed and hummed like there were a million bees in my skin.

Shaking my head, I huffed. Of course, he was gorgeous. He had money, which meant time for extra grooming and skin care and working out. What was more impressive was how he'd looked at me and my mom. He'd *seen* us, even though we were lowly workers.

He'd been kind, he'd been appropriate, he'd been ... quiet. No bragging, no showing off, just existing like anyone else.

"Pea?" I heard my mom's voice and turned to find her standing behind me with a smile on her face and wonder in her eyes.

"Someone's on the phone for you," she said, clutching the device to her chest while she bit her bottom lip.

"Who?" I asked, brushing the crumbs from my lap as I stood.

"Jackson Reid," she mouthed, the sound low.

My heart thrummed hard in my chest, my eyes widening to saucers as I looked at my mother. "What?"

She shoved the phone to me, and I grabbed it before it fell. My mom grinned as

she shimmied back inside the house. My head was reeling with questions. Didn't we do a good job? Wasn't he pleased with the service? Maybe he was calling me to accuse me of something? What could he say? That I listened to music instead of focusing? That I had looked at my phone.

If Mom lost her job because of me ...

I cleared my throat and placed the phone to my ear. "Hello."

"Lily," he answered, voice like a velvet baritone.

How was it possible that just that made my whole body feel hot? "Hi."

"It's Jackson Reid," he said.

"Yeah, I, um, did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all," he assured. "I called because I wanted to speak with you in person."

"Oh," was my only reply.

"Could we meet somewhere tomorrow?"

I froze. What was happening? "Um, yeah, sure. You said nothing's wrong, so ...

yeah."

"How does noon sound?"

I rubbed the nape of my neck. "Noon is good."

"Great, I'll send a location."

"Sure."

"I'll see you then," he said before he disconnected, and a deathly silence followed, the phone still clutched at my ear as I tried to process what happened.

"What did he want?" my mom asked, still standing close.

"Um, he wants to see me," I said, sure I was speaking a foreign language because it didn't sound right.

Her eyes widened. "Wow, another job?"

I shook my head. "I don't know; I don't think so."

"Well, there's only one way to find out. Luckily, you don't have a job tomorrow."

"What does a guy like that want with me?" I asked.

"I'm sure he has no ill intentions, Pea.

Everything will be fine," she said as she rubbed my shoulders. She kissed my temple and disappeared into the house again.

I sighed and nibbled on my fingers as I decided to check my own phone since I hadn't done so in the past hours.

There was a message from Cassie, a few hours ago that read… *the photos are out…* followed by a link. It took me a second to realize she was referring to Brendan's party. I'd completely forgotten.

I clicked on the link, which led me to the photographer's website. I had barely any interest but figured it would take my mind off things for a little while. There were some group pictures, some singles and some candids taken at the most random moments. I came upon one with Noah and Cassie from when they were inside the house. Cassie pretended to hide her face while Noah looked down at her, smiling. He looked at her as if she were the only one in the room.

I scrolled further down and paused when I saw Brendan and me jumping inside the pool. It was captured at the perfect

moment, mid-air, before my body hit the water. A photo that showed pure joy.

I quickly scrolled by and saw the photo of Brendan and me at the poolside, almost kissing. My stomach churned. Anyone who knew who Brendan was knew he was rich and probably thought I was some sort of groupie, considering Brendan was not a one-woman man.

Damn it. I have a meeting with Jackson Ried tomorrow. What if he saw this and got the wrong idea about me? Worse, what if Brendan tried to force me into a relationship with this photo?

God help me.

***

I had a couple of drawers filled with shorts, a few dresses, and even fewer jeans. I hadn't realized how scant my closet was until I had to actually go through it, looking for something appropriate to wear to meet a freaking billionaire.

I bit my nails and stared down at the pile I had thrown on the bed. It didn't matter. It didn't matter *who* I was meeting. I was still me, and clothing didn't determine that.

Taking a calming breath and motioning with my hands as I released my worries on an exhale, I made my choice. I pulled out a pair of boyfriend jeans and a slightly cropped white top. He hadn't sent a location as yet, so I had no idea of the type of setting we'd meet in, but whatever it was, those clothes would have to do.

I showered and got dressed. My mom entered my room just as I was about to go to the kitchen. Her face lit up when she saw me, and my shoulders dropped, the tension fleeing from my body.

"He sent a location," she said, handing me her phone.

I scanned the contents, my eyes squinting as I gave it some thought. It took me a quick Google search to realize it was one of the most expensive restaurants in town.

"What the hell," I said softly, scrolling through to see what I was up against. This

place was for the elites, and reservations had to be booked days ahead. How was he the exception?

I looked down on my clothes and started to fidget. What if I were tossed out for wearing this?

"Always be yourself, sweetheart. That's what makes you stand out." Mom cupped my face in her hands. "Who you are says more than some clothes."

I nodded. "You're right. I should get going. Can I borrow your car?"

"Of course."

I sighed as I grabbed my purse, said goodbye to my mom and left the house. I turned the music on and turned it up. If I let myself think, I'd think myself out of this. It was just like the party – living life without worrying about everything that could go wrong, which meant following my GPS's instructions and nodding along to the music, not letting a single thought worm into my head.

Forty-five minutes later – almost noon on the dot, I drove up to the entrance of the posh restaurant. *Javier's*. A valet greeted me and looked at my mother's Prius like it was an alien he wasn't sure how to work with. Still, he managed to be polite as I offered my name and handed him the keys.

As I stepped outside, a trail of vehicles came and went, showcasing the wealthy clientele that frequented this restaurant. I watched as my Prius traveled along the privileged line like a lawnmower through a car dealership.

I took one step towards the door and remembered I didn't have a way to ask Mr. Reid if he was here. Would I get laughed at if I asked for him at the host stand? But it was almost twelve, and if he were a man of his word, then he'd be here already. I walked to the host stand, focusing on softening each step so I wouldn't draw too much attention.

"Welcome to Javier's," the host greeted.

"Thank you," I answered, forcing a smile I hoped looked more real than it felt. "I'm here to see Jackson-"

“Oh, of course. Right this way, ma’am,” he said before leading the way through the huge restaurant.

A few seated guests were littered spaciously across the floor, some lifting their heads from their meals to look at me. While some were friendly, most looked me over like I was committing a sin by being here without dressing up.

Most people were in suits and dresses, wearing fancy jewelry and watches, while I had committed to casual. They knew I didn’t belong, and based on how they were sneering, they wanted me to know it. If being this snobbish was part of what it meant to be rich, I wanted no part of it.

I almost asked the host if he was sure he knew where Mr. Reid was, but then I spotted him. He was enjoying a cup of coffee in a suit – looking as suave as ever. Just as I saw him, he looked up, and my heart thrummed in my chest. Suddenly, I felt nervous and out of my depth.

Why were we meeting again? Why here and not at some simple coffee shop? He stood,

looking twice as big as I remembered and inclined his head to me, his ash-gray eyes focused entirely on me.

"Sir, someone will be with you in a second," the host said before leaving me there.

"Lily, I'm glad you made it," Mr. Reid said as he hurried to pull out a chair for me.

I smiled as I took a seat. "Thank you."

His warm scent enveloped me, filling my head with an earthy warmth that made me feel safe.

He took a seat himself and stared at me as if he were studying a textbook in another language. My eyes started to burn, and I fought the urge to curl in on myself or slip under the table to avoid the scrutiny.

"You can take a look at the menu; choose whatever you'd like," he said.

The last thing on my mind was food. I just wanted to know why I was here, but for courtesy's sake, I picked up the folded menu and scanned its contents.

I recognized nothing on it. If this were English, I must have forgotten how to read,

but I noticed there were no prices. It was *that* kind of restaurant. The kind that expected you to have enough to cover the bill, and if you couldn't, they wouldn't stick you in the kitchen; you'd be tossed in jail.

A waiter came while I was looking and greeted Mr. Reid as if he were a regular. That was no surprise at all.

"Just water for me, please," I said with a tight smile, sure even that had a price tag.

"I'm fine for now," Mr. Reid said.

I shifted in my seat when we were left alone once again. I couldn't wait anymore. I'd barely slept last night. "So, why – what did you want to talk to me about?"

He didn't speak right away, just sat there as if wondering how to go about the conversation. "I'd like you to accompany me to a gala."

"What," I said, my voice low. "Me?"

"I need a date – a fake girlfriend; I saw you and thought you'd be perfect."

"Why? You know nothing about me." Was this a red flag or just a warning sign?

“I don’t have to; I’m a good judge of character. It’s one night, not a lifetime commitment, Lily,” he said before taking another drink of coffee.

“You came to that conclusion based on a one-minute conversation that we had?”

“Yes.”

“That’s insane,” I said. “What makes you think I’d say yes?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” he quickly retorted.

My body heated as the corner of his mouth lifted. Still, I knew exactly where I stood in his world – at the bottom, below the noses of the rich and powerful. Why me?

“You have supermodels at your beck and call, actresses, influencers and a line of other sophisticated women waiting and willing to do whatever you please. Why pick a plain, poor girl who cleans your house?” I asked, curious for an answer.

He set his mug down. “You’re the furthest thing from plain.”

“Still doesn’t answer my question,” I

replied.

He met my gaze, and I felt like melting as his eyes softened. “You are effortlessly lovely, aren’t swooning at my feet, and you’re clearly not the kind to manipulate.”

He wasn’t wrong, per se, but he could have held a raffle or something, maybe called up an old friend. When I didn’t answer, he sighed. “I felt chemistry with you, which will make it easier to survive the scrutiny. Didn’t you feel it, Lily?”

I swallowed. Answering that bluntly felt like a trap. Folding my hands on the table, I refocused. “What’s this gala about anyway?”

“It’s for charity this weekend.”

“This weekend?” I repeated, a little shocked.

He gave a curt nod, and I sat there pondering over it.

“I could pay you for your troubles,” he said, and my gaze shot up to him.

First, an invite, now a paycheck, too? Was he expecting more than having me silent on his arm? “What?”

“We can make this a transaction if that’s easier. I pay you; you do this for me.”

There were some things I wasn’t willing to do for money. Being his date would already get me more attention than I’d ever wanted. And if he paid me … god, it was one thing for me to wear cheap clothes, but for me to *feel* cheap? Hell no.

“I’m not for sale, Mr. Reid. If you think I just moonlight as a housekeeper-”

“That’s not what I was implying,” he was quick to defend.

“So, you’re just implying that I’m poor and eager to seize an opportunity? It would have been nicer for you to say I’m manipulative. I’m not a gold-digger.” Apparently, my first impression of him had been wrong.

“You’re overreacting,” he replied, calmer than I had expected.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I said as I stood. “Have a good day.”

I made my way outside, searching for the valet. Such a long drive, and for what?

“Lily, I’m sorry I offended you; that wasn’t my intention.” I turned to find Mr. Reid right behind me, his face unreadable.

“You can’t just walk around expecting people to bow to you just because you have money. I can’t be bought,” I hissed.

My Prius arrived just in time. I got in and closed the door, making sure not to slam it. He didn’t get the satisfaction of me making a huge scene or of *buying me*.

Rich men always expected people to bow down and graciously accept whatever they gave. Jackson Reid was no different than Brendan on the inside. Plus, being paid to be on his arm was a slippery slope into him demanding more after putting cash in my hand.

No one would own me. No amount of temporary ‘chemistry’ with someone would make me agree to something so ridiculous. Money be damned. My pride was worth much more than a shameful night and some bills paid faster.

Chapter 7

Jackson

I watched as the silver Prius disappeared into traffic and couldn't help the smile that spread over my lips. Well, if I had doubts about Lily, she'd just murdered them all– I wanted her by my side this weekend. If she refused because I offered money, perhaps she'd accept if I framed it another way.

I dialed Paul's number and placed the phone at my ear, still staring at where the Prius had disappeared.

"Is now the time you're going to reveal all your secrets?" Paul asked. "Going to tell me about mystery girl, why you've been so short tempered and-"

"I want you to get me everything on a Lily Edwards –everything."

"What's this about?" Paul asked.

"Come to the penthouse later this

evening when you have the info," I said before I disconnected the call.

***

I couldn't get her off my mind even if I wanted to. Not only because of her beauty but also because of how authentic she was. You'd think that after asking someone to meet you at Javier's – one of the most high-end restaurants in the city – they'd try their absolute best to wear something flashy or elegant. Lily had appeared in jeans and a crop top. People whispered, but she didn't even look their way.

On top of that, she'd said no. Not to get more but because she was fed up. She'd stormed out because I'd offended her by offering money for her time ... amazing.

I could never fathom the idea of someone turning me down – even if they wanted to; knowing who I was would make them think twice. That didn't seem to matter to Lily – as far as I saw, she didn't give a flying fuck about who I was. The last time that happened to me was when I was a teenager in

Skid Row.

It was refreshing, nonetheless, which was part of the reason why I wanted Lily so much. I liked real, and she was 'real' personified. Plus, she was captivating.

Her beauty was just the start. The way her nose wrinkled when she was disgusted, how her eyebrows would move as she was thinking, how expressive and clear she was intrigued me.

The elevator dinged, and I knew Paul was here. He was the only one who had an automatic pass to my penthouse.

"Jackson!" he called just before he made an appearance at the entrance to the living room. He had a file in his hand. Paul always delivered when asked to do something.

"Oh, we're drinking wine, are we?" he said, and my gaze dropped to my half-empty glass. "Well, I could do with some cold beer, thank you," he said, his voice fading after him as he made his way to the kitchen.

"You need to restock, by the way!" he called from inside, and I shook my head.

He appeared in a couple of seconds, his beer to his mouth as he took a hearty swig. He dropped the folder on the coffee table in front of me and plopped down beside me.

“Who’s she?” he asked.

I reached for the file without answering and skimmed through the contents.

“Lily Breanna Edwards, twenty, born and raised in L.A to a married couple, Gianna and Bernard Edwards. They lived a happy life until two years ago when breadwinner Bernard passed away: a heart attack. Then, Lily dropped out of college, and Gianna has been left with a pile of bills that she’s still trying to cover,” Paul informed.

I read it, but somehow, I couldn’t believe it. It explained why she was doing house cleaning, but it didn’t explain why she didn’t jump at the offer of money when it was offered. Was it pride?

“So, I’m dying to hear – who is she?” Paul insisted.

I glanced at him. “She was one of the cleaners I had the other day.”

“What’d she do – steal something?” he asked. “Would explain why you’re going to all this trouble.”

I shook my head. “She didn’t steal anything. I asked her to be my fake girlfriend for the gala.”

Paul’s forehead wrinkled, he blinked a few times, his mouth moved wordlessly. “Y-you what?!”

I didn’t repeat it because I knew he’d heard perfectly.

“Are you insane?” he hissed.

“Far from it.”

Paul shook his head as if to clear it and then adjusted his glasses. “You said you had someone already –”

“I lied.”

“For fucks sake! Jessica was right there, ready whenever you were-”

“I don’t want Jessica!” I snapped, harsher than intended.

“She’s a perfectly reasonable choice. She knows the part, she knows-”

“I won’t repeat myself again,” I warned, chilling him with my gaze. “Jessica is not and will not be an option for any event, any party, anything in my future.”

“Well, you’re definitely not bringing Ms. Lily Edwards here,” he said, gesturing to the folder.

“I can and will do whatever I please,” I said. Paul was my best friend, and I valued his opinion, but there was a limit. He’d passed it.

“Come on, Jackson, think logically there. This is one of the biggest galas in the country – 40,000 dollars per seat with A-listers from all over the country. There’s no way you’re bringing *the help*,” he said with a dry scoff.

My gaze narrowed at him. “Don’t tell me you think ‘the help’ aren’t invaluable.”

“Jack, that’s not what I-”

“Without people working hard in service industries, you know we’d be nothing, right?” I demanded, more heated than I’d expected. “They work hard, just like us … maybe harder than us every single day and don’t get a bit of the recognition.”

“Just slow down a second, I just-”

“Each person you consider *help* are human beings,” I finished.

“Human being, yes, but that’s her title. Do you know how ridiculous you’ll look walking that red carpet with a fucking twenty-year-old nobody at your side? You were lucky to be among the few people with a plus one. This isn’t that kind of charity event!”

“Paul, I appreciate you as a friend, but it’d do good to remember that I was far worse than Lily two decades ago. You insult me by insulting her,” I informed firmly.

Paul sighed and trailed his hand across his face. “Okay, fine. My apologies, but let’s say you take this girl to the event; how do you know that she’s not in it for the fame like everyone else that you’ve accused?”

“Because I asked her already, and she said no. In fact, she was quite upset by the idea,” I admitted.

Paul raised his hands. “Ha, well, at least she’s sensible. So, why are we having this conversation if she said no?”

“Because I won’t take no for an answer,” I said as I emptied my glass.

Paul was back to looking stressed all over again. “Why are you so set on this girl? The media will have a field day. You’ll have two charities on your hand. One in the form of a brown-eyed brunette from the crappier side of town – and before you argue – even if you don’t see it that way, the press will, and they’ll run with it.”

I continued watching him, just watching as I tried to make myself digest what he was saying.

When I didn’t argue, he continued, “She’s twenty years old, and you’re thirty-six, she’s poor, you’re rich – she’s a college dropout, and you’re an established billionaire. Should I continue, or do you understand where I’m going with this?”

“You won’t change my mind on this,” I replied.

“What about the fact she said no?”

“I offended her. I’ll fix it.”

“What did you do to offend her?”

“I offered her money.”

Paul groaned and slapped his hand to his face. “Why are you doing this to me? This is just a press nightmare. If she says that to the wrong person, it could ruin you! Jackson, you are the prize here, not the other way around.”

“Maybe you should check the prescription on those glasses, Paul.”

“Sure, she’s beautiful, but there are plenty of beautiful women in the world. Get a different one to go with you to the gala.”

“I want her. It’s that simple.”

He sighed dramatically and put his beer to his mouth, downing the remaining contents in one go. “What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing,” I answered as I rose from the sofa. “I’ll handle it. Lily will say yes, and then we’ll go from there.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

“I’ll move on accordingly.”

“Let me know when I need to do damage control,” he said as he stood. “But for my trouble, I’m taking the rest of the beer from the fridge.” He hurried to the kitchen.

When he got back, beer in hand, he headed for the elevator.

"Sleep usually puts things into perspective. I suggest you do that," he said before he left.

I moved to the coffee table in the living room once again and fetched the folder from it. I went to the front page and smiled when I saw her address. A lead I could work with and a plan to put into action. I'd done a whole lot more with a whole lot less.

Chapter 8

Lily

I'd barely gotten any rest throughout the night because I couldn't stop thinking about Jackson and his 'offer.' Did he really think I'd fall to my knees and give praise just because he offered money? Money couldn't buy everything, and it definitely couldn't buy me. Jackson Reid clearly needed to learn that.

If he'd just asked nicely, then I would consider it because, prior to that, I'd thought he was a good man. But at the first sign of hesitance, he had decided to show his hand – show who he really was. An asshole who was used to getting his way because of his reputation, looks, and wealth.

My mom entered the room just as I was making my bed. After telling her what had happened yesterday, she said she understood where I was coming from, but I knew part of her wished I'd taken that money. As much as

I'd loved to help, I couldn't take one step towards that kind of temptation. Selling a date for a hell of a lot could lead to me making worse choices for less.

"Hey, Pea," Mom said as she took a seat at my small desk chair.

"Morning. Did you make breakfast?"

"Yeah, French toast and bacon," she answered.

"Sounds fancy. What's the occasion?"

"Nothing really. I was able to pick up a few extra groceries with the tip I got from Mr. Reid," she said, and the smile fell from my face.

"Oh."

"Remember, we have that job in town in a few hours," she said, changing the subject.

"I remember."

A small silence tensed the air around us before she cleared her throat. "You know, Lily, I was thinking… maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to accept Mr. Reid's offer…"

My shoulders fell. "Mom…"

“I’m proud of you for saying no, I am … but there are more debts than you can imagine, and … I know it’s not your responsibility, but the pressure is there, and if I can’t shoulder it, it’ll fall to you.”

My heart fell hearing her say it out loud. “So, I’m supposed to just sell my soul? No. I won’t. We’re going to get by, and that’s without the help of some rich ass…. a-hole who thinks he can just throw his money around. I’ll find another part-time job and-”

“It would only be for one day,” she said, “and at such an amazing event.”

“No, it wouldn’t stop there. This event is huge, and if the media sees me at his side, they’ll do their search, tracing it all back to the first boy I kissed. It may just be for one day for him, but our lives will be uprooted, they’ll run with whatever story gets the most attention. Money aside, I don’t want to be defined by the press or by a man.”

She swallowed. “Thinking about it like that … you’re right. Still smarter than me, huh?”

I sighed and reached for her hand.

“We’re gonna be fine. You’ve told me that over and over, and you’ve always been right.”

She rubbed my hand with her thumb and nodded. “As long as we have each other, we’ll be happy.”

Suddenly, I heard a car pulling up the driveway. My mom looked at me with surprise. “Is that Cassie?”

“No,” I said slowly. “I told her today’s a work day. Are you expecting anyone?”

We both pushed the curtain out of the window to see an all-black Mercedes Benz SUV parked outside. My heart lurched in my chest. We’d only worked for people that rich, and only *one* had any reason to be here …or what he’d consider a reason.

“No fucking way,” I muttered.

“Lily,” she scolded, and I bit my lip.

“Sorry,” I grumbled, “but see, look at how ridiculous he already is!”

Jackson Reid stepped out of the vehicle, adjusted his jacket, and then walked towards the front door. My mom’s eyes widened as she looked at me.

“What’s he doing here?” I whispered harshly.

Mom led me to the living room, then nearly pushed me at the door when he knocked. I glowered at her. We’d *just* talked about this.

If I said no again, would he get Mom fired?

“Go, go!” my mom rushed despite her girlish smile.

I lifted my head high, then pulled the door open. The first thing that greeted me was the scent of his cologne. It wasn’t overwhelming, but still warm, woodsy, perfect. It matched his looks perfectly.

We said nothing for a few seconds. I just stood there waiting as he looked at me with those intense, gray eyes. As his gaze roamed the length of my body, I realized I was still in my pajamas: a strapless, pink, floral top and matching shorts. My hair was a mess around my shoulders, and I might have had an imprint of my pillow wrinkles on my face.

Still, Mr. Reid looked at me as if I were a snack to be devoured. My entire body grew

heated, and I felt a soft but demanding tingling spread from between my thighs.

"Good morning," he finally greeted.

I gripped the door tighter. "Hi."

He glanced over my shoulders. "May I come in?"

"W-w-why?"

"I want to talk to you," he said before he glanced behind him. "We could do it here, but I doubt you'd like questions from your neighbors."

I pushed the door open and watched as a satisfied smirk curled his lips. I led him to the living room, which was open to the kitchen. My mom was pretending to be busy in the kitchen but rushed in with a bright smile on her face.

"Mr. Reid, it's so nice to see you again," she said. "Please, take a seat." She ushered him to the empty sofa.

"Thank you, Mrs. Edwards; it's a pleasure seeing you again as well," Mr. Reid said genuinely.

My mom giggled at that, and I resisted

the urge to roll my eyes. She was like a schoolgirl with a crush. “I have a pot of coffee ready and some French toast if you’d like some.”

He nodded. “If it’s no bother, coffee sounds great.”

When my mother left, he turned to me, and I tried to get comfortable in the chair, keeping some necessary space between us.

“So, what’s this about?” I asked firmly. I ignored the glare I knew my mom was sending my way.

“I wanted to apologize for how I handled things yesterday,” he began. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Okay.”

“I shouldn’t have offered you money, and I understand now how that sounded at the moment. I meant that because I was asking for your time, so it would be only fair to ask your price. It was wrong of me. I’m here to ask you for a second chance.”

As much as I appreciated the full apology … “I can’t.”

His face didn't change. "Why not?"

"I don't want to be in the spotlight," I said. "I don't want strangers digging up my life to see who I am or why I am with you."

He said nothing at first. In fact, as he processed, his face fell despite the understanding in his eyes. Seeing him so … disappointed made me feel guilty, but I tried to remind myself that he could survive bad press, I couldn't.

"I understand that. Is there any way I could change your mind?" he asked, straightening his back.

As my lips parted for a response, my mom reentered the room with a cup of coffee served in her nicest mug on top of a tray she *never* used.

"Ah, thank you," Mr. Reid said as he took the tray and immediately opted for the coffee, taking a long sip. "This is perfect," he complimented.

My mom wore a blush that would probably stain her cheeks for days. "Thank you, sir."

“Reminds me of my own mother,” he said warmly. “I remember stealing a cup as a kid because I loved it so much.”

My mom chuckled. “That’s sweet. Does your mom live in the city, too?”

He visibly swallowed, his gaze dropping to the tray in front of him – his smile faded. He squeezed the mug, and for a second, I was sure he was going to shatter it. “She was killed in a mugging.”

The breath hitched in my throat, and my mom audibly gasped, placing her hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry to hear that. It must have been so hard.”

“It was so long ago … but yes, it was,” he replied.

“How old were you when it happened?” my mom asked as she took a seat beside Mr. Reid. I wondered if she saw him as a full-grown man or a child who needed to be comforted.

“I’d just turned nineteen. She was all I had.”

“Oh, I can’t imagine how awful that

must have been for you – all alone in this world," she crooned.

"I don't know what I'd do if I lost my mom. She's everything to me," I chipped in as Jackson met my gaze. We shared a gaze that made my entire body tingle.

My mom and Mr. Reid continued to talk while I zoned out, thinking about what he'd said and what he'd asked of me. Did he still feel alone? Is that why he wanted someone like me, someone easy and simple? Someone he could trust to accept one night without wanting more or demanding more? Someone who didn't want the press and fame?

What a lonely life if a stranger was better than people he knew. I couldn't imagine not having Cassie and my mom, having people who liked me for me, not what I could offer.

"I'll be your date," I said softly. They both stopped talking as they looked at me.

He studied me intently. "You were clear with your no. Are you changing your mind – really committing to this?"

"Yes," I squeaked.

“You’re willing to be on my arm at the gala?”

I sucked on my bottom lip and nodded. “Uh, yes? It’s just one night, right. I pretend to be your girlfriend, and then it’s over?”

He gave a curt nod. “One night.”

My mom squealed as she bounded from her seat, clapping her hands. “Amazing!”

Jackson and I continued looking at each other as if it were the first time we’d seen each other. Rather than blatant lust or some kind of plan in his eyes, he looked puzzled, as confused and surprised as I felt.

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“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked me several minutes later as we stood outside his car.

“I’m not, but I’ll do it. Consider it a favor,” I said as I gave him the best smile I could manage.

“I can pay you for your troubles, so at least both of us get something out of this,” he

said, and I almost rolled my eyes.

"Here we go again. I don't need your money, and I don't want to have to keep saying that. I've gone on less fancier dates for free – you're no different."

He laughed lightly, ending on a full smile so charming, warm and ... cute that I couldn't get my brain to work correctly. I tried my best not to blush.

"Okay, but I *will* be handling the expenses for the event – your dress, makeup, whatever it is that you'll need," he insisted.

I stiffly nodded as I looked up at him, towering over me. My words stuck in my throat. "You said at least both of us can get something from this – what will you get?"

"The satisfaction of having the most beautiful woman I've ever seen by my side. I also have a feeling you'll make the night more fun for me, Lily. You're genuine, and you don't scare easy."

I couldn't hide my blush this time. "Well, I'm glad you think so."

He cocked his head to the side slightly.

“I’ll be in touch?”

“Sure, wait, Mr. Reid,” I gave him my phone and had him put his number in. “Just so you can talk to *me* and not my mother.”

He nodded along, then handed my phone back. I almost turned to go inside, but he spoke. “Jackson, not Mr. Reid. Just … Jackson.”

He extended his hand, and I looked down at his long, thick fingers. With some hesitance, I lifted mine and placed it in his. Our skin touched, and he enveloped me with his huge hand. I was surprised to feel some callous on his palm, but it only made my head fuzzier.

My heart galloped, and the breath caught in my throat at the warmth that flooded my body. Our gazes locked, and I swear I could picture him pulling me against him, putting his other hand on the small of my back and kissing me silly as his hands explored every inch of me.

Then I remembered where we were and pulled my hand away from his quickly. He cleared his throat and opened his car door,

pausing just as he was about to step in. He pulled a card from his pocket.

"Call me or text – whichever," he said.

"Okay." I held up my phone.

He sat down, and I turned to go back inside, but Jackson called back to me. "Lily, if you start getting cold feet."

"Like you said, it takes a whole lot to scare me, Mr ... Jackson," I said. "And I have work, so go do rich people things."

Jackson flashed me another real smile before heading out and leaving me struggling to focus on anything but that heart warming smile.

Chapter 9

Lily

"Who was that, and why are you smiling like you've been struck by Cupid?" Cassie asked, nearly making me jump out of my skin. She looked me over. "Nice P.J.s."

I slapped my hand to my heart to calm it down. "When did you get here!"

"You'd know if you weren't so busy staring into space," she said, a brow raised. "So?"

Was this something I told my best friend, or was this some sort of secret that should remain between Jackson and me until the actual day of the event? There were no rules. We didn't discuss anything really, and Cassie was always my go-to. It wasn't like I'd signed an N.D.A.

I led Cassie into the house with a smile still on my face. We went right to my bedroom and flopped down on the bed. She shoved me

until I rolled over, ordering me to spill the details.

"That was Jackson Reid," I finally revealed.

She was slow to process, but then her eyes widened, and her mouth fell open. "What? Jackson Reid, as in *billionaire* Jackson Reid with the multi-billion-dollar skincare line?"

I nodded, and she blinked a few times.

"Well, what the fuck was he doing here?" she asked.

I told Cassie everything, from the very moment I went on the very first cleaning job to his place until he left just minutes ago. Her mouth was on the floor at the end of the conversation, and I was on my toes, waiting for her analysis. She had way more experience with guys than me. Maybe she'd noticed something I missed.

"Holy fuck! I can't believe he wants you to go with him to the charity gala. Do you even know how epic that is – it'll be on TV and shit!"

I cringed slightly. “I know, it’s crazy.”

“But you said he offered to pay; why didn’t you take the fucking money?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need to be this man’s charity case. Cassie.”

“I get that, but you’ve got a ton load of bills, and cleaning a couple of houses won’t make it all go away,” she said, softening her tone. I hated the pity; I hated when she looked at me like I was the saddest thing to exist. “I’m not saying you can’t do it all, but if you got to choose the price, you could come back to school with me.”

“Then I’d owe him or open the door to something I wouldn’t be able to take back. Especially if someone found out,” I said.

She sighed heavily. “Okay, okay, fine, but fuck! I can’t believe this is happening. So, are you ready for all the media attention?”

I groaned. “Not one bit. That was one of the reasons I said no the first time, too. The press will eat me up, but then Jackson came here, and he told me and my mom that sad story about how his mom died, looking tragic

and lost, and I ... I couldn't help it."

"Aww," Cassie made a face. "That would change anyone's mind."

"You know about it?"

"Yeah, I was obsessed with him and his brand at one point in my life and did my fair share of research. He's self-made, you know; he was dirt poor before he became a billionaire," she says as if it's common knowledge.

"He was?" I asked, straightening on the bed.

"Yeah, I don't remember his exact story, but he wasn't born with a gold spoon in his mouth," she informed.

"Wow," I said, surprised.

"So now that you'll be the fake girlfriend of the richest and hottest man in the city, what are you gonna do?"

I snorted. "Be his date and go back to real life."

Cassie scoffed. "Oh, please, you'll see. By the way, you were daydreaming, I can already tell you like him."

I shook my head. “I’m attracted to him; there’s a difference.”

“Is there?” she smirked.

Swatting her with a pillow, I then put it against my face. Cassie pried it off, and I pouted. “What if this turns out to be my biggest mistake?”

“What if it turns out to be your biggest blessing?” she countered.

I was about to reply when my phone buzzed beside me. I glanced down at the screen and nearly scoffed at the notification.

“Is it him?” Cassie asked, nearly climbing on top of me to look.

“No, it’s Brendan. He’s asking if I’m coming to his party on Saturday, but that’ll be the same time as the gala, so that’s a no,” I dismissed. “I won’t even answer, he’s just trying to win me back so he can finally .... you know ...”

Cassie grinned. “These rich boys are just eating you up, aren’t they?”

“Jackson is the farthest thing from a boy,” I quipped.

“You’ve got that right. He’s a six-foot beast of a man with a face carved by the Gods. I mean, Brendan is fine, too, but there’s no competition at all.” She winked.

“It doesn’t matter. Jackson isn’t mine.”

“Wanna make that a bet?”

***

I lay in bed, mulling over what Cassie had said and having no idea what to make of it. As attractive as Jackson was, I didn’t see this lasting for more than a day. What would he want with a woman like me? Men like Jackson, who were well-established in this world and didn’t have anyone in their life that couldn’t contribute, right?

It was like he said, he just needed a beautiful woman for one night. When that was all over, he’d end up with someone more successful and outgoing. Someone who had seen the world and didn’t have to consider working two or three jobs just to pay the bills.

A year from now, I knew I’d look back

at this whole experience and laugh at how ridiculous Cassie and I were, thinking it would be more than a great story to bring up at parties.

Still, Jackson made me feel things I hadn't felt with anyone else. I didn't even know it was possible for me to feel every hair on my body stand at attention until then. I wanted to explore the attraction, but there was no way I'd ever admit that to him or anyone else.

Chapter 10

Jackson

I glanced at the time and muttered a curse, realizing I was late for my meeting. Thankfully, it was just in the apartment lobby, not far away. I grabbed my jacket and left the room as I headed into the elevator.

I glanced at the time again. It was just a couple minutes to 9 a.m., and I had planned on getting to work at 9:30. I had just enough time to get a conversation taken care of and a short time to get to work. It didn't really matter since I was the CEO, but I prized myself on being punctual and setting an example for others.

Stepping into the lobby, I held my head high as I searched the area. It didn't take long to spot the brunette woman seated on one of the lounge chairs, her bag clutched tightly to her as she looked around the expansive hall. Our gazes met, and relief flashed across her

face as she stood.

"Hello, Mrs. Edwards," I said as I extended my hand.

We shook hands before we sat – me on the opposite side.

She dusted something off her knee. "Good morning Mr. Reid. You wanted to talk?"

I nodded and cracked my knuckles. "Yes, it's about Lily – I hope you didn't tell her about our meeting."

She shook her head. "Oh no. I left before she even woke up."

"As you know, I offered to help her the first time, but she wouldn't accept my money…"

Gianna blushed but didn't shy away. "Oh, Lily is a prideful little girl. Please don't take offense – that's just how she is."

I cleared my throat. "I know you have unpaid bills, and I know you may lose the house soon if the payments aren't made."

She glanced around as if someone would be listening, then nodded once, no

longer meeting my eyes.

"I want to help," I said.

"Sir?" Her eyes narrowed.

"It's obvious Lily won't accept anything from me, so I've come to you. It's the least I can do," I said.

"Mr. Reid, please. I don't want to be of any trouble-"

"Please, it's no trouble at all."

"Are you sure?" She hesitated until I nodded. She clasped her hands. "I- I don't even know what to say. Thank you so much!"

I smiled. "Think of it as an advance on all the tips I planned to give you for the work you both do in my apartment."

Her eyes watered with tears as she stood. I stood as well, but the last thing I expected was a hug. Taken off guard, my body stiffened a little, but slowly I relaxed. The embrace was short but filled me with a sense of nostalgia. That small moment was all the affirmation I needed. Lily didn't have to know, but at the end of the day, she and her mom would have a roof over her head.

***

After finalizing things with Gianna, I headed to the office and arrived at 9:35. I still sported a smile on my face that quickly fell when I entered my office and saw Paul inside. The last thing I wanted was him in my ear, but I knew better than to be optimistic.

“What is it now?” I asked as I moved around to my desk.

“Where is little miss Cinderella, and why haven’t I met her yet?” he asked expectantly.

“Not here, but I want you to accompany her shopping. You know the theme of the event, and you have a great sense of fashion,” I said.

I could see a smile working on his lips, but he swiped his tongue over his teeth instead and crossed his arms. “So, this is actually happening?”

“It is.”

Paul pulled in a breath. “Fine, but you

do know you'll have to be seen out with her before the gala, right. Let the media have an idea that you're dating."

"I don't want the media to hog her, and I don't want her changing her mind. They'll see her for the first time at the gala. It's one night only."

Paul rubbed the small goatee on his chin. "Okay, a surprise. The media will definitely eat that up. You'll be the night's hot topic– that could definitely work."

I rolled my eyes.

"Jackson, I think you need to think this through some more. After a night with your fake girlfriend, what will be the story?"

Truth was, I had no idea, but I hoped for the best outcome. I wanted Lily, plain and simple. "That depends on how the night goes."

Paul raised a brow. "You have the face of a superstar, and you're richer than half the blokes in the city. What girl wouldn't want to be with you?"

"One who judges me for more than what I have," I answer.

Paul scoffed.

I sighed. “Anyway, get in touch with the designers and arrange a date. Time’s already against us.”

Paul nodded. “Okay.”

“I have some work to catch up on.”

Paul stood. “Okay, I’ll take care of it. Call me.”

I nodded and watched as he left the office. Despite what I said, work was the last thing on my mind. My body was filled with this constant yearning for a woman I doubted really wanted me. Behind the perfect image, what was I? A workaholic? Lonely? Confused and a mess of complexities wrapped up in corporate red tape?

If I took one misstep, she’d call me on it. If I tried to charm her the way I usually did, with experiences, amazing dates and compliments, I had a feeling she’d see through it all.

I picked up my phone to call her, and she answered on the first ring. “Hello,” she said, and I smiled at the sound of her sweet,

soothing voice.

"How is your morning?"

"I'm barely out of bed, Jackson," she sighed.

I could tell she was stretching with the way her voice faded – a small moan escaping. It sent a warm shiver up my spine that had me anticipating more.

"Sounds like a good start," I teased. "Sleeping in, taking your time."

She scoffed. "Nothing's stopping you from changing your work hours."

I gave a short chuckle. "I want to see you tonight."

There was a short pause. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I'd just like to know you better, being my fake girlfriend and all."

"Mm, there's nothing really interesting about me," she said.

I leaned back in my chair. "Really? Because you're the most interesting person I know."

She giggled at that. “You must not know a lot of people. What time?”

I traced my thumb along my low stubble. “How does seven sound?”

“Oh, that’s late…”

“What, do you have a curfew?” I teased.

She choked a laugh. “What if I do?”

“Then I might have to sneak you out. You can make it through your window, right?”

“You’re funny,” she said, voice tainted with mirth. “I’ll be ready for seven.”

“Good. I’ll see you then. I’ll pick you up.”

I ended the call with a smile on my face, feeling like a teenager all over again. It felt good – it made me feel alive, and for as long as I lived, I’d chase that feeling. Hopefully, in time, I wouldn’t have to chase it; it would be right there –always present.

Chapter 11

Lily

Choosing clothes was never really a hard task for me. I'd usually just grab the first thing my hands touched and move on. But with Jackson, I found problems with everything. Too baggy, too tight, not classy enough, again and again, I tossed things to the side.

Finally, I chose a dress that reached mid-thigh and was a deep royal blue. It had long sleeves to protect from the night's chill and was overall plain, but it was comfortable, and that was all that mattered to me after exhausting myself going through clothes.

I let my hair out and was happy with the waves it fell in. When I glanced at the time, I realized it was almost seven, but there was no sign of Jackson.

I went to the living room, where I saw my mother singing in the kitchen. She'd worn

a smile all day, even when we were working this afternoon. I'd asked her over and over why she was so chipper, but she just shrugged and said she was enjoying life. Who was I to stand in the way of that?

"Going somewhere?" she asked, looking me over with wonder. "You're so beautiful."

"Thanks. Jackson and I are going out," I informed and watched the way her whole face lit up. "Mom, don't get all hopeful like that, it's all business."

"Of course, it is, pea," She replied despite her smirk. "Where to?"

"Oh, I don't know. I didn't ask ... maybe he likes surprises."

"Keeps things interesting," she winked.

I bit my lip and looked at my mom. "You have a good feeling about him, right?"

"Of course. He's a good man, Lily. I know that, and I know deep down you know that, too,' she smiled.

I nodded. "I know. But there's an age difference, a class difference, we barely know each other ... I'm just worried."

“You’re both adults. I met your dad when I was twenty-one, he was thirty-two. As long as you’re happy, I don’t see the problem.”

She’s being suspiciously optimistic. “You know we won’t be actually dating; it’s for show, right?”

“Are you looking for a way out?” She asks before closing the distance between us and rubbing my shoulders. “Just enjoy the time. Everything will work out, trust me.”

I smiled, and just then a car honked outside. I glanced at the door and took a step that way. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I won’t wait up,” she said with a little shimmy.

I made a face but went outside without comment.

Jackson stepped out of his car – this time, a black convertible – and watched as I approached. I felt nervous, but the way his eyes roamed my entire frame, darkening with some kind of emotion I liked, told me that I didn’t have to worry about my attire when it came to Jackson.

He was in a sweater that he rolled up to his elbows. His muscles seemed more pronounced in them, and his chest even seemed broader. He wore black jeans. I doubt Jackson had any idea how incredibly attractive he was – how he could take my breath away without laying a single finger on me. The closer I got to him, the more I felt drunk in his presence alone. Every single cell in my body craved more than the slow caress of his gaze.

Was attraction always this intense, or was it Jackson specific?

"You know you're two minutes late, right?" I asked, trying to calm my reaction to him.

He chuckled. "It's refreshing to find a woman with the same respect for time."

"Well, I'm a fountain of respect, just look at me," I joked.

His hot gaze trailed over my body again. This time, it was slower and more intentional, and I might have soaked my panties a bit just standing there.

"Respect, beauty, brains, confidence,"

he lists, taking a step forward with each word. “Maybe less like a fountain and more like the full package.”

“Did you practice that line?” I tease.

“I didn’t have to. I do actually have some smarts in here,” he said as he tapped his head. “But don’t tell anyone. It’s a secret.”

I giggled softly, then looked towards the car. “Nice ride.”

He lifted his hands and revealed the keys. “I’m glad you think so. You’ll be taking it for a spin.”

My mouth fell open. “What?”

“You’re choosing where we’re going.”

“That’s crazy,” I said as I took the keys. “Are you sure?”

“I said I wanted to know you. This is better than interviewing you.”

I grinned as I hopped towards the car and slid into the driver’s side. Everything was perfect and soft and clean, and I couldn’t get enough as I ran my hands along the buttery smooth leather interior.

“This is so cool,” I whispered under my

breath, feeling the car sink a little when Jackson joined me.

When I pushed the ignition button, I turned to him, barely hiding my excitement. “You sure you want me to drive, not just navigate?”

“I’m sure. What do you have in mind for us?” he asks.

“How does pizza sound?” I asked.

“With a cold beer? – sounds like heaven.”

I drove off and headed to a small pizza shop not far from our house. When I went to order, we both decided that Jackson should stay in the parking lot since we didn’t want the attention. In less than twenty minutes, I got the food and went to join him again in the car.

“That smells amazing,” he said as he helped me with the things.

“It’s my favorite restaurant, bar none,” I informed as I settled back in and looked at him. “They’re the best.”

“Are we eating here?”

I shook my head. “No, I wouldn’t make you eat in a parking lot. I have somewhere in mind.”

“Are you going to share the details?”

“Some excitement will do you good,” I teased.

“You’re something else, you know that?”

“Not used to letting someone else have control?” I asked seriously.

I glanced over as he made himself comfortable, crossing his arms behind his head. “I’m not, but I trust your lead … at least for tonight.”

With that, I started the car and drove about a mile or two from where we were. The ride was fairly silent but not uncomfortable. He didn’t try to make me answer any questions, didn’t comment on my driving, we just enjoyed the radio.

When we arrived at the lookout point, I smiled at the memories and watched as Jackson stepped outside, too. His eyes were transfixed on the view ahead. He walked

further towards the edge of the cliff and just stood there, drinking it all in.

He turned to me a minute after, curiosity in his gaze. “How did you find this place?”

“I used to come up here with my parents when I was little. We made it a whole thing,” I said as my gaze wandered to the view of the city that stretched as far as my eyes could see. “It’s my favorite place in the world. You told me a secret about you being smart, so this is my secret. No sharing.”

“Deal,” he agrees, offering me his hand and guiding me forward. At the same time, I could feel his grip tighten on me like he was worried I was going to go over the edge.

I swallowed every urge to move closer to him and focused on the vibrant ribbons of light and towering skyscrapers peeking beyond the treetops. The lights, nature and the stars were a perfect combination.

“It’s beautiful,” Jackson mused.

“I’m glad you think so. We should eat; I’m starving,” I said, needing to escape the romantic moment.

I got the box of hot pizza and the pack of beer and placed them on the hood of the car, where Jackson had already taken a seat. He rubbed his hands together when he saw the pizza coming.

He took a slice, and I took one as well, almost closing my eyes when the taste hit my tongue.

“Mm, you were right. This is good,” he said, nodding his head as he inspected his slice.

“I told you.”

“Is this your favorite food??” he asked.

I licked my lips, worried about making a mess, then swallowed my bite. “Nope. French fries.”

He raised a brow. “Lily, be serious.”

“Nothing beats French fries,” I defended.

“Oh, a good steak definitely does.”

“I’m not convinced.”

He chuckled. “That sounds like a challenge. I’ll change your mind.”

Somehow, as stupid as it might have sounded at that moment, I hoped he'd follow through. Not because I wanted to eat good steak but because it sounded like a promise of a future.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"The gala," I lied.

"You don't have to be nervous; everything will be fine."

I shrugged. "The fanciest thing I've ever gone to is prom. I don't know how to act in those spaces."

"There's no acting; you just be yourself."

My stomach fluttered when our gazes met for a fleeting second. "Do you ever get tired of these social events?"

"All the time," Jackson answered. "They're never fun, especially when you're surrounded by fake people all trying to steal the spotlight, no matter what it takes."

"I'd thought maybe you'd feel at home there," I said, and he turned to look at me.

"No one feels *right* there, they just find

ways to tolerate it. Drinking is a popular method … but so many people just say whatever they expect other people want to hear," he says carefully.

"That must suck."

"It does. Basic honesty has become rare in my life," he admitted.

"I'm sorry about that."

"No need to be. I'm still grateful for where I am in life. The journey wasn't an easy one."

"I had no idea you were self-made," I confessed.

He looked in the distance. "After my mom died, I knew I still had to make her proud. I applied for a scholarship in my first year, got recognized by an agency in my second year, and put myself through college. I modeled for a few years until I had the means to pursue my passion project."

"You didn't like modeling?" I asked.

"I didn't like not being able to eat what I wanted, always being criticized, being ordered around," he leans towards me with a

wink despite the sauce on his face. "Shockingly, I enjoy being a boss."

I giggle and wipe his face. His eyes drop to my fingers, and I wipe them on a napkin while blushing. I should have just told him it was there.

"What about you, Lily? What are you passionate about?" he asked after a brief silence.

I placed the half-eaten pizza back in its box and sucked in a breath. "I always wanted to own my own business. I was studying business in college when my dad passed, and my whole world crumbled around me."

I swallowed hard, my eyes blurring, then felt something tighten around my hand; Jackson had laced our fingers. I squeezed. Misery loved company, and grief loved any kind of compassion.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"Losing him was hard, but now I feel guilty that I dropped the ball on my future. He was always talking about it, pushing me forward, and I came to a standstill," I sniffed, then shook my head. "Not exactly hang-out-

worthy talk, right?"

"I'm honored you're willing to share secrets with me," he says softly, then debates something. He runs his hand through his hair and clears his throat. "Lily, I'm not trying to butt in or force things, but ... I can help with that."

"Jackson, please… you don't have to feel sorry for me…"

"This isn't pity," he said, his tone firm.

"It feels like it. Please," I said as I pulled my hand away, feeling a tad bit irritated.

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine, just please stop pushing. I don't want your money or your connections. Talking like this is more than enough," I said before taking a bite that was way too big for my mouth.

An awkward silence passed between us.

"I want you to meet with my image consultant tomorrow. You'll be meeting with a few designers and getting whatever you need for the gala," he said, voice a bit drier and colder.

“You have an image consultant?” I asked.

Jackson nodded. “He takes care of my social media and advises me on a few things. He’s also my closest friend.”

“Sometimes, I forget you’re one of the most influential men in this city,” I said.

“You make me forget that I am.”

“Is that a good thing?” I asked.

“It’s wonderful,” he answered before messily digging into his slice of pizza again.

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Half an hour later, when we were ready to leave, I decided to take the passenger’s side and have Jackson drive me home. When he started the engine, he turned to look at me, total peace on his face.

“I enjoyed tonight; thank you,” he murmurs.

I’m shocked that he’s so easy to be with. “Me too.”

“We should do it again,” he said warmly, his hand brushing mine but drawing back before he held it. “I want us to be comfortable with each other and … I really want you to enjoy this experience, Lily – the gala and being with me.”

“I do so far,” I whisper. “More than I thought I would.”

Jackson’s gaze held mine, and my breath caught in my throat, not sure if it was admitting the truth that had me on edge or having his total focus. The more he admired me, the more I wanted to melt into him. After hesitation flashed across his face, he moved closer, his hand brushing mine before his light fingers trailed up the inside of my forearm, making me shiver.

I found myself leaning towards him, too, eager to welcome his lips on mine. As his breath fanned over my face, I was sure I was going to spontaneously combust or be struck by lightning. I felt *everything*, so hyperaware of him, the way he smelled, the small hitch in his breath, and every single cell in my body that I wanted to jerk him against me just for

something tangible to focus on.

His soft lips brushed mine slowly, and then he turned and did it again, his mouth molding to mine, warm and sweet until my knees trembled, and I kissed him back.

For some reason, I wanted to open my eyes, to watch him kiss me, but when his lips parted mine, and I breathed him in, the thought evaporated. His tongue brushed my bottom lip, then slid deeper as his hand flowed up my shoulder and cupped the back of my neck.

A soft sigh escaped me as he deepened the kiss, a pricking pleasure igniting across my skin as heat bloomed low in my belly. His fingers tightened on the back of my neck as he renewed the kiss, and our tongues stroked, explored, teased. The feel of his hand on my skin and the taste of his lips on mine left me feeling fuzzy and desperate for more.

Jackson pulled back slightly, breaking the kiss, and I opened my eyes to stare at his flushed face, filled with lust and desire. My nipples hardened beneath my dress as I panted.

“Why did you stop?” I asked.

He grinned as I leaned into him once more, wanting to taste more of him, wanting to quench this feeling that had me burning despite the cool night. This time, the kiss was slower –more deliberate as Jackson led me into a deeper string of kisses that promised a whole lot more. My fingers slid through his hair while his arm circled the small of my waist, pulling me tighter against his body, and I moaned against his mouth as my breasts brushed his chest.

We pulled apart several seconds later, lips parted as we tried to catch our breaths. He held my face in one hand as we tried to regain some sense of composure. No one had ever kissed me like that, made me feel like a lightning rod in a storm, tingling with potential.

“Wow,” he murmured as a boyish smile spread over his face.

“Wow,” I repeated, and we both laughed.

I licked over my bottom lip, still tasting him as warmth crept to my cheeks in the

aftermath of our kiss.

Jackson shook his head. “I should get you home … before I change my mind.”

“Agreed,” I rasped.

With that, we drove off.

For the first time, I understood why they reacted the way they did in movies when the boy kissed the girl. After plenty of kisses, I’d assumed it was all movie magic, but there was definitely more between Jackson and me. More than lust, more than budding feelings or infatuation.

When I arrived at my house, I turned to him. “Thanks for tonight; I really enjoyed myself.”

He grinned and trained his eyes on mine rather than my lips. “I did, too.”

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“So, now you *want* to see me?” He asked playfully. “I’m flattered.

I bit my lips and looked towards the house. “You should be. I’m picky.”

“I can’t wait to learn more about you,” he lifted my hand, and his lips grazed my knuckles, making me tremble as goosebumps broke out over my body. “Good night, Lily.”

“R-right,” I whispered, struggling to unbuckle. “Goodnight.”

I opened the door and got up to leave. His large hand clasped around mine. I turned to face him, eye to eye with his stormy gaze. We leaned into each other and shared a brief yet tender kiss that had me smiling from ear to ear.

Without a word, I walked towards my front door, feeling his eyes on me the entire time. It took me multiple tries to get the key in the door since all I could think about were my still buzzing lips.

When I got inside, I closed the door behind me and pressed my back against it, giggling like a teenage girl. Hurrying to my room, I hopped in bed, replaying the night over and over in my head until I fell asleep with the memory.

So, *this* was Jackson ... he was more than any interview or magazine could put into

words. I crossed my fingers as my eyes grew heavy, hoping everything would continue being this wonderful.

Chapter 12

Lily

I stood at my door in denim shorts, a pair of flipflops and a large t-shirt. My outfit was tailored to trying on clothes. I put my hair up in a pony and waited by the front door. Jackson had texted, telling me the driver was on the way and I definitely wasn't going to start off on the wrong foot by being late.

"Ugh, I'm so excited!" Cassie squealed from beside me. It was a last-minute decision to have her accompany me, but Jackson had approved it immediately.

"I'm kinda nervous," I admitted.

"What for? You're the star here today. The cards are in your hand," she said.

"I still don't know these people, Cass," I admitted. "Jackson is one thing, but his employee/ friend is another. I know he didn't come from money, and he never treats me like we're different ... except when he's offering

me money, but this … this feels big."

Cassie calms my nerves, then we both look at my phone as it buzzes. Brendan.

Still waiting on an answer for Saturday.

"Nope, you have better plans," she giggled, reading the message over my shoulder. "Noah's going, so since you're not gonna be here, I guess I'll go to the party with him."

"Have fun for the both of us," I encouraged.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll have way more fun than me. You have *Jackson*," she teased, and I rolled my eyes, regretting I'd even told her we'd kissed. The teasing would be endless.

"Don't give me that look," she said while batting her eyelashes. "You two have already been on one date, so the one-night rule is total bullshit, plus you totally have the hots for each other."

"How do you know that? You haven't even seen us together," I argued.

"Because you're all lit up, and you have a good sense about people. You wouldn't be

all sweet and eager unless you felt he liked you."

"I'm just a thorough fake girlfriend," I insisted, and she raised a brow.

"We'll see how long the word 'fake' stays around," she giggled.

Before I could reply, a black sparkling jeep pulled up, similar to the one Jackson had driven when he first visited the house. My heart skipped a beat, and I glanced at Cassie as she bounced with excitement.

As we walked towards the vehicle, a tall, skinny man stepped out – taller than Jackson, who was well over six feet. He wore a suit that looked like it had been tailored on his body and thin-framed glasses, which seemed a bit tinted in the sun.

My heart dropped as he looked me over, his eyes losing more shine with every second. Even if Jackson refused to see it, this man knew I didn't measure up to the man who called me beautiful, who kissed me like he believed it and talked to me like we were on equal terms.

It was an unwelcome slap back to

reality. *Fake* was the only way I could have Jackson Reid and any hope for more would just impale my heart later.

"Lily Edwards," he said as he looked at me from head to toe. "Nice to finally meet you. I'm Paul."

He must have done his research on me.

"Nice to meet you, too," I finally said, shaking the hand that he had outstretched. His hand felt like he'd spent the better part of his days in nail salons doing manicures. Mine were definitely rougher than his.

"Oh, this is my best friend, Cassie Peters. Jackson said it was fine if she came with us," I introduced as best I could.

Paul smiled, but it wasn't close to genuine. "Of course. Cassie, Lily, we'd better get going, we have much work to do."

We both climbed into the air-conditioned vehicle, which reeked of Paul's potent cologne. We greeted the driver, who seemed one with the car with zero expectation of being acknowledged.

Cassie glanced at me from the corner of

her eye, and I had to bite back a nervous laugh. She took my hand and squeezed, holding her head high.

"So," Paul began as soon as he got settled. "I'm guessing Jackson briefed you on the do's and don'ts for the gala?" he asked, legs crossed in front of us.

My forehead wrinkled. "No, not really."

He sighed heavily. "You're his date – *fake* girlfriend – for the night and nothing else. If they try to ask other questions, you avoid them or allow Jackson to answer. Don't lie – even small ones are dangerous - but don't share too much, either. Above all, do not share you're a house cleaner."

I frowned. "I'm not ashamed of what I do."

He looked up at me from under his glasses and shifted in his seat. "Of course not. But imagine how the world would see you if they discovered you met Jackson while cleaning his apartment."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Cassie beat me to it. "I actually think it's a cute, wholesome story."

“Well, fortunately, the only one of us here who’s paid for thinking is me,” he replied without looking away from his phone.

Cassie and I shared a look. She didn’t like him and was more than ready to defend me as long as I approved it. I shook my head slightly, but the frustration on her face wasn’t the kind I could argue with. “I’m not sure your opinion of Lily matters.”

Paul finally looked up, giving Cassie his full attention. “Jackson’s matters, obviously, but I’m his best friend for a reason. Girls like Lily don’t belong at events like this. You’ll have your night to shine, then go back to the life you’re used to. Remember that.”

His eyes focused on me as he said it, every cold word followed by another. Was that his real job? Judging people under him and putting them down to feel better about himself?

“I think it’ll do you good to remember who’s doing who the favor here,” I said sharply.

“Oh, you’re doing Jackson a favor? My, do tell,” he encouraged sarcastically.

I gritted my teeth at his arrogance. “I didn’t ask for any of this. In fact, I turned down the idea in the beginning-”

“I’ve come across a lot of people in my line of work, Miss Edwards, and no one does a favor for free. Perhaps you should talk more to Jackson about what your family is getting out of this,” he said darkly.

“Funny, I thought classy men didn’t interrupt women. Especially not women their boss liked,” Cassie said while picking at her nails and making sure to flick whatever dirt was there onto the seat.

I shook my head. “You know, I don’t have to take this. I can shop on my own with my best friend and actually enjoy myself rather than be looked down on.”

“What, are you going to tell Jackson I’m being uncomfortably honest?”

“I’ll tell *your boss* you’re failing him by being rude and condescending,” I say seriously. “You’re an employee just like me, but at least I know basic customer service skills.”

Cassie giggled beside me, and Paul

scoffed, but I braced myself. Leaving was an option. I had no doubt I could cause a whole scene and leave the vehicle, but I had to prepare myself. If Paul was a *friend* and this terrible, what would the gala be like?

I'd committed, and I had to follow through, which meant I needed to practice dealing with assholes, starting with Paul.

This was just a way to keep my mom's boss happy, a way to keep us employed so we could take care of bills, and I could rebuild my life. One night and Jackson, his amazing kisses and all that potential, would just be a pleasant dream that no one could ruin.

I just had to get through until the gala before Jackson could confuse me further or his friend could grind my self-confidence to dust.

***

The drive continued until we parked outside a glass structured building. Paul adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

"We're here. Our first stop," he said as

he pushed the door open and stepped out. Cassie and I followed behind, looking at each other as we looked at the building. I could pick the amazement from Cassie's face and used her joy to keep me steady.

Paul climbed the short stairs out front, and the automatic glass doors opened up to him as he stepped inside. Cassie kept my hand as we followed and kept her voice low. "Don't let that asshole get in your head. He could be testing you or something. Just be your strong, determined self."

We entered the store, and Cassie let out a low gasp. It was beautiful, way too beautiful to be a store. Of course, as we took in the manicured plants, water features, and marble, people were looking at us too. Everyone was in the highest fashions but looked at Cassie and me with confusion, not judgement. That was progress, right? Proof that not everyone was going to immediately look down their noses at me.

"Well ... we should catch up," I mumbled, leading Cassie further ahead.

I noticed Paul and headed in that

direction until I noticed he was deep in conversation with an older woman and a large man. Though the man's back was turned, it didn't take me long to realize it was Jackson. My heart fluttered in my chest, and I could feel a weak smile creeping on my lips. Just then, his gaze went to me and held.

Jackson said something to the woman, and then he walked towards me, only glancing at Paul for a brief second – his gaze focused on me and only me. There was no disappointment in my looks, no sign he was bothered. Instead, it was like he was trying to memorize me exactly as I was.

Cassie tugged on my arm. "Holy shit."

"I know," I breathed as he approached, looking like he was in some kind of movie – his perfection was staggering.

"Lily," he greeted.

"I didn't know you'd be here," I said just as he wrapped his arm around the small of my waist and pulled me in close.

He placed a gentle kiss on my cheek before drawing back, his hand still on my hip. My eyes darted around the store, and I saw

that a few people saw the interaction, causing a blush to warm my cheeks.

"I wanted to see you," he said, glancing over my shoulder at Cassie.

"This is my best friend, Cassie. The one I told you about," I said.

"Of course. Pleased to meet you." He inclined his head.

"Oh, my God, it's an honor. I legit love your products!" she gushed; her face flushed.

Jackson shook her hand. "Thank you."

He turned to me. "I hope you enjoyed the drive," he said, glancing at Paul, who was talking to the woman Jackson spoke to earlier. "And you finally met Paul."

"Yea-"

"Paul's an asshole," Cassie mumbled from beside me.

Jackson's gaze snapped towards Cassie, then he looked at me. "Did he say something to you?" he asked, searching my face.

"It's fine," I said, not wanting the conflict.

He turned to Cassie for answers, and, of course, she wasn't one to hold back. She told him what had happened, and I stood there, watching as his jaw tightened, his narrowed brows almost meeting with the frown he made.

Just as I opened my mouth to speak, Jackson walked off in Paul's direction. I tried to catch Jackson and pull him back, but he was already gone.

"Shit," I said as I looked at Cassie, who was just beaming the entire time. I shook my head. "Isn't being tactful a thing?"

"I'm not going to hide the fact that he was a jerk to you. Billionaire boy should know that his best friend isn't being great. You even said he wasn't being a good employee," Cassie argued, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Yeah, but ..." I couldn't remember why I didn't want Paul exposed. "I don't want to be a problem."

"Being honest when you're asked a question isn't a problem, Lil," Cassie insisted. "You stood up for yourself with Paul, and you shouldn't hesitate to do it with Jackson."

I nodded. I knew she was right. I couldn't stop being honest and open just because of who I was with. If Jackson really liked me, he'd want me to be clear about things. He'd want me to be myself.

Cassie took my hands and pulled me close. "Plus, Jackson didn't seem any happier than us when it comes to what Paul said. As far as I'm concerned, that's a point for him."

Rolling my eyes, I sighed. "I just hope Paul doesn't retaliate."

"As if your future hubby will let him," she teased.

I shoved her, and soon enough, we were back to laughing. She bit her lip. "Maybe we'll get to see Jackson Reid beat a man down for insulting you. Can you imagine how romantic that would be?"

Hell no, fighting wasn't the mark of a good person, it was the mark of someone who didn't know how to control their emotions. Beyond that, the last thing we needed was fuel for the press to run with.

Chapter 13

Jackson

I didn't know where the raw rage came from – never had I ever felt something like it before in my life. Years worth of frustration, of pushed down emotion bubbled through me as Cassie told me how rude Paul had been, until the only option was to excuse myself from the women and deal with the problem head on.

I walked over to Paul and pulled him from Mrs. Bamford who seemed taken aback by the sudden interruption. She was the least of my worries.

Paul had a confused, out of place expression on his face as he looked at me and then my hand on his arm.

"What is your problem?" I hissed, trying my best to keep my voice down.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, shrugging himself from my hold.

“I leave Lily in your care for an hour, and that’s how you treat her?” I demanded, watching as the realization dawned on his face.

“I was being hard on her for your sake,” he defended heatedly.

“I don’t remember asking you to insult her, to test her, or whatever the hell you *thought* you were doing. I don’t need you or anybody else’s approval!” I hissed between clenched teeth.

Paul’s lips were drawn together in a pout. “Fine, I’m sorry.”

“You disrespect her again, and you’re fired.” I caught a glimpse of his wide eyes.

“But-”

“Right now, I’m questioning if you deserve the title of friend. You seem more eager to be there for Jessica than me,” I finished before I stepped from him and rejoined Lily and Cassie.

The look of concern was evident on her face as she glanced over at Paul and then back at me. I cleared my throat. “Mrs. Bamford will

show you around – show you the best designs. I'll be close if you need anything," I said as I glanced over to Cassie. "Both of you."

Lily nodded. "Thank you."

"If you don't see anything you like here, then we'll choose somewhere else," I said, just as Paul walked out of the building. I had no interest in where he was going or what he was doing.

"What about Paul?" Lily asked, even though her eyes hadn't strayed from me.

I smiled, a bit calmer. "Trust me, Mrs. Bamford is better company."

"Okay."

I handed them over to Mrs. Bamford while I took a seat in an empty chair. Despite Paul warning me against coming out with her and my comment of not wanting the press involved before the event, I couldn't quite resist the option to spend more time with Lily.

After the kisses we'd shared, it cemented that I wanted her more than ever. I enjoyed her company, I genuinely liked who she was, and I liked how I felt when I was

around her. The fact that she ignored my wealth, didn't want anything from me, and still spent time with me was earth-shattering. How could I possibly resist a woman who offered the whole package and some?

Regardless, I still tried my best to consider Lily's feelings in all of this because despite what I felt, I still wanted her to be comfortable. If she decided that she only wanted one night, she'd get the best night I could give her and then try to deal with giving her up. Still, I crossed my fingers and hoped she felt what I did – that the warmth between us was strong enough to get through the necessary evil of my life.

I sat there for what seemed like hours while Lily and Cassie sorted through clothes. Though sometimes I couldn't see them based on where I was sitting, I could hear their occasional giggles, which made me smile, too. She had a certain child-like spirit when she was with Cassie. She was more comfortable, and I hoped a day would come when I could say the same when she was around me.

Sitting there, I wondered what it would

be like to travel the world with her and bask in the look on her face each time she saw something that took her breath away. Would she just want to go to parks and ignore the expensive side of things? Would she get tired of me paying for everything (probably)? Could I really just spend date nights with her playing board games, watching T.V. shows and cooking with her in my tragically un-used kitchens?

It was wishful thinking, but I welcomed the fantasy. All I'd done was kiss this girl, but I enjoyed having her in my life. I wanted more of it.

"Jackson," I heard my name being called several times. It took me a minute to snap out of my thoughts and realize that Lily was standing in front of me with a concerned look on her face while Cassie smirked.

"Oh," I said as I cleared my throat and looked around the room. I realized Lily had a garment bag in one hand and a shopping bag in the other.

"You found something," I said as I stood.

“Yes, I think it’ll be perfect,” she said while blushing faintly.

“Great,” I said, happy to hear it. “I’ll take care of it,” I said, moving over to Mrs. Bamford and handing her my card. I glanced back over at Lily and saw how she and Cassie were smiling away, almost bursting with excitement.

“Thank you, Mr. Reid,” Mrs. Bamford said as she handed me back my card.

“Thank you.”

“Beautiful girl you’ve got there. She’ll look good on your arm,” she winked.

I only smiled, not wanting to confirm anything or even hint at it, though it might have been obvious. Still, Mrs. Bamford was an old friend, and I knew she’d never gush about this to the media.

I walked back over to the two girls and glanced at my watch. “How does lunch sound? You two must be hungry.”

“Oh, Cassie has to go. She’s going to meet her boyfriend,” Lily teased, and Cassie swatted her playfully on the arm.

“Oh, shush,” she said, turning to me. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Reid.”

“Likewise,” I said.

She smiled, briefly hugged Lily, and then she was out of the building. I turned to Lily.

“Where to?”

“I think it’s your turn to choose,” she said.

“I know a few restaurants,” I suggested.

“Don’t take this the wrong way … but I think we’d get too much attention if we go somewhere public. Plus, you’re in a suit, I’m in shorts and a crop top. I don’t think the two go together in any setting,” she said, prompting my eyes to travel down her smooth, shapely legs.

“We could stay in, order food and watch a movie,” I offered.

She smiled, and just as she was about to reply, Cassie came back in, a frightened expression on her face. “Paparazzi’s outside,” she said as she quickly closed the door behind her. “A ton of them.”

I muttered a curse and raked my fingers through my hair. “Someone must have tipped them off that I was here.”

“I’ll distract them a little. Maybe you guys can sneak around the back?” Cassie offered. “I know how to keep people focused on what I’m saying without actually saying anything.”

“Sure, thanks, Cassie,” I said as I held Lily’s hand. “I’m sorry, I didn’t expect this to happen.”

“It’s okay,” she answered softly.

The disappointment and nervousness on her face were obvious. She didn’t want the cameras, didn’t want the fame. She was nothing like Jessica.

“We should go,” I said as I held her hand and led her to the far end of the store.

Mrs. Bamford met us on the way. “Oh, Mr. Reid, I’m sorry. I don’t know who could have done that.”

“It’s really okay. Things like this are bound to happen,” I reassured. She gave us an apologetic smile and pushed the back door

open, offering a camera-free escape. I nodded once. “Thank you.”

I looked around and didn’t see anyone but quickly realized that getting to the car would pose some problems.

“Let’s go,” I said, still clinging to her soft hand and trying to ignore the feelings her touch spurred inside me. We quickly went to the car, our getaway almost seamless before a reporter spotted us and quickly came running our way. I blocked her as best I could. “Cover your face if you want to avoid being in tabloids.”

“Jackson, who’s the new girl?” That caught the attention of the others, who quickly came barreling our way.

We sprinted to the car, Lily covering her face with her hand. Still, the paparazzi had ways of getting information. She slid into the back seat. I shut the door and saw her curl in on herself to hide her face as I hurried to the other side. The cameras were still at the windows, all still trying to get a picture despite the darkly tinted glass.

“Go,” I instructed the driver, who

started the car right away and slowly drifted through the pool of reporters.

With a sigh, I turned to Lily, who was pale, her eyes wide.

"Are you okay?"

She cleared her throat and gave me the saddest, fakest smile I'd ever seen. "Mhmm."

"I should have asked Mrs. Bamford if we could stay or if she wouldn't mind getting the car. That was a mistake on my part," I said.

"It's fine. Something like this was bound to happen anyway," she murmured while playing with her fingers. "The secret's out."

I tried to read the expression on her face but couldn't pinpoint what it was. "And how do you feel about that?"

"I don't know. I guess I'll just have to see what happens after today."

"The ball's in your court, Lily."

After a while, she relaxed into the seat. She glanced out the window before she looked back at me. "Where are we headed?"

"Sir, we're almost at the apartment," the driver answered curtly.

I slowly faced Lily. “Are you still available for lunch?”

“At your place?” she asked.

Maybe that was too much for her after the paparazzi. “We could have a drink in the lobby and talk?”

Her lips parted to say something, but then she clamped them shut and nodded. “Okay, I don’t think reporters will be there.”

The car came to a halt shortly after, and we made our way out and into the building. Luckily, there were only a few people scattered in the halls, and just about all of them were residents. I watched as Lily slid onto a chair, clutching her little bag in front of her, her cheeks red as she looked at the variety of beverages on display.

We’d managed to evade the press so far, but would one great night together be enough for her to want to put up with this after our mad dash and cameras being shoved in her face?

Chapter 14

Lily

"Oh, I'll just have an iced tea, please," I said to the bartender who came to take our orders.

"Whiskey, neat, please," Jackson ordered.

My thoughts were all over the place, and each one was about what just happened. Had the paparazzi gotten a picture of my face? Would people be trying to find me now? Would they harass my mom? Would we be able to just end the 'fake' thing we were doing at the gala, or would that end up being worse?

It was one thing to be a date for one night, but to be dumped by him (and that's exactly what people would think) and go back to my life cleaning houses would create a story that no reporter could resist.

"Tell me what you're thinking, Lily." I looked up to find Jackson staring at me with

those sultry gray eyes and was suddenly reminded of how amazing last night was. So much better than today, but today was his normal, wasn't it?

"Um, I'm just thinking about the media, is all," I said, smiling to the waiter who handed us our drinks. "How long will the pretense go on for before… you know." I couldn't bring myself to say the words.

This had to end, I knew that. Cinderella had one night and a happy ending, but that was a fairy tale. This was real life. There was no place for me in his world other than cleaning his house and mooning over him from a distance.

He straightened just a little. "We can continue seeing each other for a month after the gala. By then, things would've started to cool off."

"You really think so?" Of course, it was all business. Even the kiss was probably a test to make sure I wouldn't get attached.

He pulled in a breath and reached for his drink. "I'm really not sure, but if we're not seen in public often, there won't be much

they'll say about us."

My eyes burned. I wanted more of him. I did. But I wasn't going to give him everything unless I knew he wanted me for the right reasons. My voice came out sharper than I intended. "Why is a date so important to you anyway? You could have gone alone. You're the most eligible bachelor in the world."

"I remember the first time I was invited to the gala – it was such a big deal. I was at the peak of my modeling career and was shocked to be invited to such a prestigious event. Some of the people I met then are still friends of mine," he said as he took a drink.

"When I launched my company, it became more important. You meet the richest and most influential people there, and as a business owner, I'd be crazy to pass up on the opportunity. Despite my success, it's still a huge career booster, and it allows you to meet and interact with some of the best. The fashion and the glamour are a cover, it's really about networking. Plus, you don't just say no to these sorts of things. I was among the few to have a plus-one, so it's only right that I

bring someone." His eyes settled on me.

I reached for my drink again and took a hearty gulp. "That doesn't explain me. You could have brought a friend."

"I have my reasons for wanting someone like you, Lily. Someone who isn't there to use me to climb up in the world," he said, just as my eyes shifted to two people who'd come to the bar area.

"I see." I leaned into Jackson a little. "So, what should we do when people look at us like that?"

His gaze shifted to the couple, who were trying their best to act as if they weren't staring at us like they could figure out what I had on him to earn this meeting.

He rested his hand on my leg, his fingers spreading fire across my skin. A surge of desire raced through me, and I tried to keep my composure as he moved closer to me, our gazes holding while my heart raced. I anticipated a kiss; every inch of my body begged for it.

His scent became more heady, his aftershave, the smell of liquor on his lips. I

was sure he was going to kiss me, and I wanted so much for it to happen, but then his head moved right past me and settled at my ear. I almost shivered when I felt his warm breath on my skin.

Goosebumps rose, and I nearly moaned. How could something so innocent feel so … sinful?

"I bet they think I'm telling you something naughty right now," he said, and my heart skipped a beat, my cheeks burning.

"You could," I breathed, realizing a second later that I'd said the words instead of thinking them. He eased back just a little to meet my gaze, his eyes dropping to my lips. I shuddered. "You could say plenty."

"There's so much I'd like to do with you right now, Lily – nothing on my mind is appropriate." His voice was low, and the longer his touch lingered, the more I wanted him to prove what he was saying.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. I could have easily said yes, but this was Jackson Reid – a man with more experience than I could ever dream of. As much as I

wanted him, so many factors were at play here. To him, I'd be another notch on his bedpost, but for me, he'd be the first man I'd ever been with. It was easy to get wrapped up in the fantasy, but one of us had to be smart.

"I think more people are starting to stare," I said, my gaze shifting a bit to a woman who pretended not to be recording us.

Jackson didn't bother to look, he only continued to look at me as if I were the only person in the room. "Do you want me to take you home?"

The wisest answer was no, but the yearning I felt for him was so intense, and despite my inner ramblings, I didn't want the opportunity to pass. A day with Jackson would be incredible, especially considering how boring my days had been before him.

To be smart or to give into this new, white-hot need that was coursing through me, steadily creeping closer to my heart? My core squeezed, sending little tendrils of pleasure through me.

I'd never felt this way with another man in my life. Such great chemistry had to be a

once in a lifetime thing. Would I look back at this, years from now and regret passing this chance up? Would Jackson be the one that got away?

"Um…" I trailed off and swallowed. "Maybe your place is better." My words were so low it was a wonder he heard what I said, but I knew he did from the gentle raise of his brow.

"Are you sure?" he asked. I nodded, unable to ignore the aching emptiness between my legs.

"Yeah, I'm sure," I answered before I could overthink.

His hand left my leg, and I immediately missed his touch. Maybe I was being impulsive and stupid, but there had to be worse ways to rebel against the world than being with Jackson.

**

It felt entirely different in Jackson's apartment. I couldn't believe how much had changed in just a couple of days. Jackson and I

had gone from complete strangers to two people tangled together by attraction. Now, we were alone for the second time since knowing each other, and I couldn't help but wonder if this time would be like the last.

I wanted to kiss him again – I hadn't been able to stop thinking about it since he dropped me off last night. I wished I'd been brave enough to admit it, but I was proud of myself for refusing to back down. How many times had I ignored what I wanted for what I needed? How many times had I put my dreams and goals on the back burner to take care of what was smart in the moment?

Jackson made me feel everything and made me want to be greedy – with him especially.

"Would you like something to eat? We could order in?" he offered when he placed the bags down.

"No, I'm not really hungry," I said. Not for food, anyway.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," I smiled, moving towards the huge floor-to-ceiling windows that

overlooked the city. I stood there and hugged my shoulders.

"What do you think people are saying?" I asked.

"You'll drive yourself crazy wondering, trust me," Jackson said from behind me.

"I don't want to check my phone. I'm kinda scared to face the music," I said softly.

"Then don't. Today, let's pretend like we're the only two people in this world," he said, and I turned to look at him. Jackson was standing right behind me, that lustful look still in his eyes. "It's just us here, Lily."

"I know."

"I don't want you to regret doing this, Lily. Whenever this starts to feel overwhelming for you, just let me know," he said, and I wondered if we were still talking about the press.

"That's ... it's a lot. Being ambushed by the press after things had been so easy before," I whispered. "But I don't regret being with you."

"You don't?" he seemed shocked.

I played with my fingers, then wiped my sweaty hands on my shorts. “No. I feel … chemistry with you. I know it’s stupid, we’re fake-dating, but being with you is different. You’re so open and … not what I expected. I want to know more about you, want to explore what I’m feeling.”

He visibly swallowed, his gaze lowering to my lips once again. “You do?”

“Yeah.” The single reply came out almost breathlessly.

I looked into his gray eyes and felt that familiar magnetic pull. The one that was unique to him alone. I leaned into him, craning my neck to meet his lips. The contact was feather-like as my lips brushed against his, but just that sent sparks through my entire body. His hand circled my waist, and he pulled me into him, a gasp leaving my lips as our bodies made contact.

He was hard, I could feel it against my stomach and wondered if he could possibly want me as much as I wanted him. Jackson kissed me desperately, licking into my mouth feverishly. I moaned softly, my hand threaded

through his hair. I surrendered to the desire pooling in my belly.

Chapter 15

Jackson

Just looking at the desire in Lily's dark eyes had me harder than I thought possible. From the very first day I saw her, I'd ached for her, wanting to be the reason for each of her sweet moans.

Now here she was, feasting on my mouth, moving against me, welcoming me to taste her, touch her, adore her. She needed me as much as I needed her, and that filled me with a sense of joy I couldn't even put into words.

"This isn't fake," I rasped against her lips before kissing along her jaw.

"Good," she hummed before stealing my mouth again in a kiss that ruined every other memory of making out I had.

Her fingers stroked down my chest, then my sides, lifting my shirt to touch my skin.

“I was afraid I was just … convenient to you,” she admitted.

“Not even close. I *want* you,” I emphasized.

“I want you, too. I want …this,” she panted.

My cock pulsed from that innocent answer, and unable to help myself, I lowered my head and captured her lips with mine, savoring in the taste of her sweetness and once again filling myself with what had been interrupted earlier.

I wasn’t as gentle as I was before. I was starving for her specifically. My erection was pressed hard against her stomach, and I knew she felt it. She kissed me back with just as much need. I stroked up her back, then down, my fingers slipping under her shorts and teasing the top of her panties.

She pressed into my touch until my hand slipped lower, grabbing her full ass and jerking her tighter against me, loving how her delicate body fitted to mine.

“Bed?” I asked.

She nodded, and I walked us back there, not interrupting our kiss. When we were at my bed, I broke the kiss to look down at her puffy lips and hazy eyes. I was fucked, totally wrapped around her finger already. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said, her voice airy and almost breathless.

My heart leapt in my chest with the confirmation. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at me with doe eyes. I clenched my teeth as I watched her. She reached for the hem of her blouse and pulled it over her head, revealing her bra, her breasts spilling out over the top, like they were desperate for my touch.

Lily blushed as I watched. She sucked her bottom lip, watching me under her lashes as she unlatched her bra and let it fall away, revealing her full breasts, her nipples tightening. Heat spiraled through my body.

My mouth watered, and I clenched my hips at my side. I was afraid to move, sure it would be a dream, sure she’d tell me to wait.

“Beautiful,” I rasped. “Perfect.”

Lily stood, and I took a step back,

watching as she pulled her shorts from her waist and gently kicked them into a corner. My eyes only had a second to feast on her shapely legs before she *lay* down and shimmied her pink, cotton panties from beneath her ass. She hesitated, met my eyes, then took her panties off, leaving them on the bed, like she needed evidence to prove how wet she was for me.

She kept her legs closed but watched me. “Your turn, Jackson.”

My clothes were gone in less than a minute as I hastened to join her. I didn’t miss the way her eyes moved over every inch of my body before focusing on my cock. Her eyes widened, and her face went neon red.

“Oh, so …” she murmured while touching her chest.

“Are we going too fast?” I asked as I trailed my hands along her knees.

“I want you,” she reaffirmed, but I waited, that wasn’t an answer. “This isn’t too fast.”

“You can tell me no anytime. One word, and I’ll dress you and cuddle you,” I promised.

She reached for me, then kissed my palm, closing her eyes. “I’m not scared.”

I gently parted her legs, my eyes fixated on her perfectly shaved, dripping wet pussy. I licked my bottom lip and glanced back at her face. I wanted to take it all in.

Her small slit parted the wider her legs went until she was open and exposed to me. I groaned and nearly leaned in to lick her. I paused. I wanted to do this the right way.

“How is every bit of you so damn perfect?” I asked.

She smiled and bit her lip. I got on my knees and pulled her closer to the edge, enjoying the sound of her gasp. I chuckled. “You didn’t think I’d just look, did you?”

“Well, I wanted you to do more than look, but you’ve been with models and influencers,” she mumbled.

“None compared to you. They all fall short,” I promised, my voice low and husky.

I trailed my pointer finger over her clit and down to her entrance, enjoying exactly how wet she was, loving how she quivered for

my light touch.

"I want to finger you, taste you … fuck you," I growled.

"Yes, Jackson," she moaned softly.

I rubbed her clit with my fingers, loving how she writhed on the bed, moaning and panting for me. My mouth watered, and I couldn't stop myself. I slid my finger down to her entrance and slowly worked it in as I licked from her opening to her clit, savoring her taste.

Her pussy tightened around my finger as I worked it deeper, curling it inside her. She moaned and stroked through my hair as I licked and sucked her sensitive little clit. Her thighs trembled, but she kept them wide, rolling her hips against my face and ruining my control.

I feasted on her pussy, devouring her as I eased a second finger inside her. She squeaked, her pussy sucking my fingers deeper.

"Jackson," she mewled. "Oh, yes."

I couldn't stop if I wanted to. I sucked

her clit, flicked my tongue over it, used every trick I knew while working my two fingers inside her, finding what made her moan and exploiting it. I tried for a third finger, determined to prepare her for me properly, but she whimpered, and I paused.

Shit.

"Lily?" my voice almost cracked. "Are you a virgin?"

Her eyes opened wide, and she bit her bottom lip before nodding.

I almost drew back, but she swallowed. "I was waiting for the right person, and I'm glad I have ... now you're here."

My heart expanded in my chest, and I felt like I could burst with the joy that poured into me. The fact she was a virgin had worried me. I didn't want to hurt her, but those final words, the intense meaning behind them.

"You have no idea what that means to me," I said honestly.

She smiled. I started to move my fingers inside her, stretching her slowly and gently as I worked my third finger into her. Her eyes

rolled back, and her back arched as her juices coated my fingers. She was doing so well and clearly loved it. Her walls started to constrict around my fingers as she gripped the sheets. I licked over her clit, and she came, yelling my name as her thighs wrapped around my ears.

"So sweet," I hummed softly, drawing back and licking one of my fingers.

I offered her the other two. She opened her lips and allowed me to place my fingers in her mouth. She sucked off her essence, cleaning my digits of every bit before she swallowed. I kissed her eagerly, slowly, drawing out each move as my cock brushed her soft skin.

"I want to please you, too," she whispered.

"You *always* please me, Lily," I assured her, kissing her forehead. "I'll give you everything that's in my power to give."

Chapter 16

Lily

My body was still buzzing from my orgasm, my brain in shambles, yet as Jackson kissed me, I felt alive all over again. I wanted to keep feeling him against me, inside me, on top of me. The need for more hammered deeper into my brain with every breath I took.

"I want you so much," I panted as he drew back.

"Not as much as I want you, Princess," he answered, his voice barely deep and rough.

He hovered over me, gazing into my eyes with so much heat, I wasn't convinced I wasn't going to burst. His hand glided around the tip of his cock before it continued over his girthy length. He pulled it into his hands several times before he reached down and kissed me, his member grazing along my stomach.

I kissed him hungrily, savoring the taste

of myself on his tongue. He trailed from my mouth and down my neck, suckling ever-so-softly before he lapped and licked one of my nipples, his hand on the other breast. I closed my eyes, abandoning myself to the sense of touch.

His mouth and fingers, tugging and teasing my nipples, made me tremble with need. It was a naughty promise of the 'more' he'd already given me. I was so sensitive, it felt as if I'd come again with just his touch. The way he was taking his time to caress each breast, switching from one to the other, my head began to swim.

"Please," I plead, wondering if Jackson had heard since he didn't ease up.

My hands trailed down his back, my nails pressing into his smooth skin until I was afraid I was going to scratch him. My hands slid down to his ass, and I pressed him closer to me, enjoying the way his hardness pressed lower on my belly.

My core tingled with anticipation, and just then, Jackson pulled away and shifted lower, aligning himself between my legs. I

gasped when his cock grazed my slit, a slight shiver running through my body. My heart thudded even faster as he directed his length at my entrance. I felt the pressure there – the tease, and I held my breath, anticipating the next move.

His gray eyes held desire and restraint. Restraint that I couldn't reach. "Please," I whispered.

"I promise I'll make this good for you," he said and without hesitance. "Only if you want this. We can stop now."

I pried my legs further apart, my lips falling open when the pressure intensified. It was one thing to have his fingers inside me but another to have something more than twice the size on its way there.

"I don't want to stop," I assured.

He groaned and kissed me again as his cock pressed against my entrance, so big, so intense. I whimpered in response.

Despite how wet I was, he didn't slip in easily, like I'd imagined, but when the tip was inside, I gasped, already feeling like I'd taken all of him. My body tensed up, trying to push

him out, even though I wanted him so much.

The discomfort won't last," he said, and I nodded.

It had to be true. Cassie had told me enough, and I'd watched enough movies to get a general premise.

Jackson leaned over me, driving his length a tad bit deeper but not all the way. Our gazes held, and he gently moved back and forth. I moaned and reached for his face, wanting to kiss him, to be closer to him. When he lowered himself to do so, he went deeper, and I gasped, my body tensing up a bit. He rested his forehead against mine as his hips moved, and I circled my arms around his back. His breath fanned against my face.

"You feel amazing, princess, but I need you to relax," he crooned.

So he paused, kissing me slowly, deeply, teasing my nipple in his fingers until I lifted my hips against him. He drove into me fully, filling me so completely, I was sure I was about to break. I gasped as a shot of pain swept through my body. Jackson continued to kiss me until the haze of pain faded from

between my legs.

"How's that fe-"

I kissed him hungrily and desperately, rolling my hips to feel him again. Jackson started to move again, gently; he drove himself so deep that I gasped when it felt as though he went too far. The feeling was foreign but sweet, and the longer he moved, the more I wanted him.

"Yes," I moaned, pushing myself against him tighter, needing all of him, as much as he could give. "Jackson ..."

His pace increased, and our combined moans echoed. He was deep, stretching me to the limit. It suddenly occurred to me that he wasn't wearing a condom, but I wasn't upset. I didn't want anything in the way. He felt too good.

Sweat started to bead on my skin, and ecstasy swept through me. Jackson went harder, the sounds of his skin slapping against mine and my own wetness echoed around us in addition to the whimpers and moans dragging from my throat.

"Fuck!" he groaned. "So good, Princess,"

he said as his muscles tightened with every movement.

I gasped when he slammed into me and dug my nails into his back, clamping my eyes shut as I was riddled with the perfect combination of pain and pleasure.

“More!” I begged, not even sure what I was asking for.

He groaned and gave me plenty, pounding into me hard and fast until all I could do was feel *him*. My walls clamped around him as he continued to drive into me, his damp hair falling to his forehead. His eyes burned through me as his lips parted. He never looked sexier.

“I w- want to be on top,” I managed to get out.

He slowed his pace, filled me with a few more strokes before he drew back and laid back on the bed, his eyes glued to me.

I got up slowly, feeling pinpricks of pain thanks to my thighs being forced wide for so long. My cheeks grew heated, but that didn’t stop me from straddling him. The lust that filled Jackson’s eyes almost made them look

black from the angle I was at. He lay there, propped up by his pillows, a gorgeous specimen of a man, all his taut muscles exposed and glistening.

I took his length in my hand and positioned myself above him before I slowly impaled myself on his cock. I gasped as he slid into me, the tenderness still present. I slowly went down on him, relieved it wasn't as painful as I prepared for. I didn't stop until all of him was inside me. I panted and held onto his shoulders.

"Such a sweet girl," he hummed, leaning forward to kiss me.

When I leaned forward to return the kiss, I gasped, pleasure snaking through me. Jackson dragged his fingers over my tits, causing my walls to clench. He held my waist and trailed his hands along my legs, sending shivers all over my skin. I moved slowly, feeling him deep in me, impossibly deep.

"Do whatever feels good," he encouraged. "I'm happy to watch."

I rotated my hips and pressed my hands against his chest, moaning when my clit

grazed against the stubble of his shaved pelvic area. I continued, moaning repeatedly while Jackson's hands explored my body.

I moved faster, chasing that pleasure as I bounced on him, rolled my hips and explored all the options I could. I rode Jackson, my back arched and my head thrown back as I gave into some primal memory of what to do.

"Oh…oh yes…God," I yelled, feeling the edge of orgasm grip me.

Just when I thought I'd come, Jackson gripped me by the waist and flipped me over on my back again. I gasped, and in the next second, he was inside me again, deep. He slammed into me and grunted, his hand planted on one of my breasts as he moved swiftly.

"Oh, my … Yes!" I shrieked, feeling the pressure begin to build. Jackson held up my legs to his chest and held them closely together, still pumping hard inside me.

"So ... fucking ... perfect," he growled, punctuating each word with a hard thrust.

I yelped at how incredibly tighter I felt this way, closed up like this. He grunted,

muttered a curse, and slammed into me relentlessly. I felt some kind of intense wild euphoria build up in me and ached for release.

I cried out loudly, gripping the sheets, my body trembling as a burst of pleasure stormed through me. My walls constricted painfully tight, hugging his cock as it continued to move inside me. Jackson pried my legs open and pumped into me, sending me further over the edge.

Just as he swelled inside me, he moaned loudly, quickly easing up. He pulled out, just in time for a long spray of cum to spurt from him. The first stream landed on my breast, the rest pooling at the mound of my already wet and slick flesh, dribbling down at the sides. I quivered, my body still coming down from its high. I breathed heavily, wholly satisfied. There was no greater feeling.

Chapter 17

Lily

It felt like I was floating on a cloud, my body completely weightless. I'd never experienced anything like this. It was freeing.

He lay beside me and reached out to caress my cheek, helping me to open my eyes. I smiled a dopy, exhausted grin.

"How do you feel?" he asked me, his voice still husky.

"Happy."

He smiled and placed a small kiss on my lips. "Me too."

He got up and walked towards the bathroom and appeared a minute later with a washcloth in hand. He pressed it to my breasts, and I almost gasped from the warmth. It didn't take long for me to realize he was cleaning me. He did the same between my legs, but that only teased my arousal.

He was careful, gentle, quiet.

When he was done, he climbed onto the bed and beside me. I kissed him tenderly, feeling my nipples tighten.

“That was amazing; thank you,” I said, my voice low.

“I didn’t hurt you,” he asked. “Be honest. I know it’s different to share a first time with someone, and I want to make sure you’re okay, physically and … mentally.”

“I’m glad we did this. I’ve never felt this way with anyone else. I’ve never been this attracted to anyone else,” I admitted.

Jackson caressed my cheek and pressed his forehead to mine, our eyes holding as I felt the blush spread over my cheek. He kissed me gently. “You’re special, princess. I hope you see that.”

I smiled at the new endearment, feeling his hardness throbbing against my leg. Wanting more, I shimmied closer. He didn’t make a move, but he couldn’t hide his eyes. The way they darkened for me.

“Well, this was never part of the plan,” I

said, swallowing. “Where do we go from here?”

“Wherever you want it to go. I want you for more than just one night, Lily; just say you’ll have me.”

The only answer I could think of was yes, and I didn’t know if it was genuine or driven by my lust for Jackson, but it was the only answer that felt right.

“I want you, too… for more than just a night.”

He smiled and leaned in to kiss me. It was soft and tender, but the intentions were clear. I could feel it in the way he kissed me and how his cock throbbed against my leg. My heart rate increased, and soon after, desire weighed my brain down. My core ached for him, tightening at the absence of him inside me. I reached for his dick, caressing it in the palm of my hand.

Jackson moaned and gently bit my bottom lip, sending a bolt of arousal through me. He drew back and watched my face as his fingers stroked over my hip and closer to my core.

His fingers went up and down my slit, my chest rising and falling, my cheeks hot as I continued to stare into his eyes. My mouth gently opened when he slipped a finger in effortlessly, curling it inside me as he thrust in and out. Shortly after, he added a second finger, and I sucked in a breath as I surrendered to each agonizingly slow stroke.

Jackson's gaze fell from my eyes to my lips, and I licked them purposely in an attempt to tease him. His fingers went deeper, and I moaned, propping my leg further up, so he'd move more freely. His pace became faster, and heat assailed my body even more as he moved inside me. How was I already close? Even as I started to writhe on the bed, pushing my body against his hands to meet his thrusts, Jackson didn't let up.

I pushed myself into his hand, desperate for all he offered. Just when I thought I'd come, he pulled his fingers out, and I gasped, my eyes widening to look at him.

I couldn't get the words out right away – I was still trying to process what had happened.

“I was so close,” I almost whispered, staring into his eyes.

“This makes it more intense when you do come,” he promised.

He rolled me over onto my stomach. He hovered over me for a few seconds before he used his knee and parted my legs. In the next second, I felt his cock grazing my ass cheeks, and my heart thrummed even faster in anticipation.

Jackson lowered himself onto me and kissed my neck before he kissed my shoulders. He was right at my ear, his warm breath fanning against my skin, his body teasing mine and causing me to quiver. I held my breath as his cock moved down my ass, pausing at my entrance. I closed my eyes, eager to feel what would happen next.

“You’re like no one else, Lily. Confident, direct, focused on what matters and still so *damn* sweet,” he growled.

I opened my mouth to answer, but he slid into me completely, making me moan. I bit down on my lip and gripped the sheets as I reveled in the feel of Jackson’s full length

spearing through me.

His hand trailed over my ass and up my sides, sending shivers across my body. He gripped my breast and slammed into me harder, faster.

“Tell me how much you like my cock inside you, Lily,” he ordered against my skin.

He pummeled inside me, hitting a sweet spot over and over again that had me delirious. I searched for words.

“I- I..” I trailed off, unable to think straight.

“Tell me,” he insisted, squeezing my breast.

“Just don’t stop,” I managed to say, just before he rammed into me. I yelped as I grabbed onto the sheets, feeling my orgasm start to build up.

“Tell me,” he ordered again. “Or I will.”

“So good!” I wailed. “Please, Jackson! Don’t hold back!”

He pulled me up so my ass was propped in the air and my tits still almost pressed against the bed. He slammed into me hard,

over and over, so my body shifted on the bed. His hand slid beneath me again, and a jolt passed through me when he found my clit. A rush of pleasure raced through me. My limbs turned to mush as I came, spasming and moaning, and then I collapsed on the bed. Jackson came with me, still buried inside. He was heavy on top of me, but I welcomed it until the warm gush of his seed filled me.

"You .. you just ..." I whimpered as he curled me against him.

"We'll fix it in the morning," he promised softly. "I couldn't stop it."

***

My eyes fluttered open to the blurry image of Jackson walking around the room. I sat up to get a clearer image of him. He had on shorts but was naked from the waist up. I smiled seeing him, and just then, he turned and saw me, a soft grin spreading over his lips.

"Hey," he said as he approached. "How did you sleep?"

I accepted his kiss as I sat up further,

clutching the blanket over my chest. My eyes searched the bedroom for my phone. “What time is it?”

“A bit past six,” he answered, sending me scrambling after my clothes.

“Shit, I have to get going,” I said.

“Why? Stay the night.”

I paused at his request, surprised to hear it coming from him but also happy that he’d want me to stay. I dressed slower. “I’d love to, but I don’t think I want to explain this to my mom just as yet.”

“Understood,” he sighed.

I finished getting dressed, and Jackson got put together as well. When we finished, he pulled me close. “I can’t tempt you into dinner, can I?”

“Rain check,” I said gently. “I have to get home.”

“I’ll take you,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, pulling on my shirt.

“Today was amazing. Ready for tomorrow?”

Oh, the gala. I still didn't feel right about that for some reason. "I think so."

"I'll pick you up at six. You have the option to get dressed here."

"I-I think I'll get dressed at home," I said.

He nodded. "I'll have some money sent to your account to cover whatever else you might need –"

"Jackson-"

"Lily, please, this time it's non-negotiable. You can get whatever you want to prepare you for the day," he said, a single brow raised. When I refused to back down, he cupped my cheek. "I know you don't need my money. I want to spoil you. Can't I do that?"

I took a slow breath. "Okay, okay."

A small smile tugged at his lips before he lowered his head and kissed me. My stomach fluttered, my mind racing back to just a few hours ago when we had been wrapped in each other's arms.

I broke the kiss and patted his chest. "We should go."

***

When Jackson's driver pulled into my driveway, I hopped out and froze when I saw a Tesla parked on the outside. Jackson climbed out after me, putting his hand on my side.

"Were you expecting someone?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "Not at all."

"Interesting," he commented.

I turned to him after blinking a few times. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He gave a curt nod. "Definitely."

I leaned in and kissed him briefly before I headed towards the house. Just then, the front door opened, and Brendan made an appearance. My mouth fell open. Jackson's car was still behind me, and I knew he saw Brendan.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, but Jackson's driver drove out of the driveway, and I was left with Brendan, who approached

with a deadpan look on his face.

"Brendan, what are you doing here?" I asked, looking behind me. Jackson was out of sight.

"I came to see you, Lily; what else," he asked, his gaze traveling down my frame.

I took a deep breath and crossed my arms. "Why?"

"I didn't want to take no for an answer, and you were barely answering my texts, so I decided to come here instead," he said as he licked his lips. "I was worried that you got so quiet."

"I already said no; that should have been enough. We're not a couple," I said, slightly annoyed.

"Right, I forgot you're in a relationship and all." There was an edge to his voice that made me scowl.

"What?"

"You told me you were single at a party less than a week ago. Now, all of a sudden, you're trending online for being Jackson Reid's girlfriend. Were my pockets not big

enough?"

My heart lurched in my chest. It wasn't strange that Brendan had gotten word of that – it was probably all over the place by now.

"It has nothing to do with that," I said, straightening my shoulders. "I'm sorry that-"

"For what exactly? For lying or for taking me for an idiot?"

My brows shot up. "I'm sorry you *think* that's all someone could be interested in. I *like* Jackson."

He scoffed and brushed his nose. "Yeah, right. You know what, it's fucking cool, I shouldn't have bought your innocent act anyway."

"What's your problem? I've always been honest with you, and I sure as hell don't owe you an explanation for what happens in my life!" I yelled.

"Yeah, sure, whatever. The act won't fool everybody, Lils. He's old and rich, and you need money. Who'd judge you for fooling him," he laughed before his features hardened yet again. "You're just like the rest of these

girls, willing to fuck their way to the top."

With that, he hopped into his Tesla and started the engine. In the next second, he was gone while I was left to pick my jaw up from the floor.

"What the hell?" I whispered to myself, heat coursing through my body. I gritted my teeth in anger and stormed towards the house.

My mom was inside when I got there. "I didn't know you still spoke to Brendan."

"I only speak to him to tell him that nothing will happen between us," I said, laying my garment bag on the sofa. "Why did you let him in?"

"He wanted to talk to you, said it was urgent and that he wasn't getting your phone. He asked if he could wait until you got back," she said.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Just don't let him in again, okay?"

Her brows furrowed. "Are you okay, Pea?"

I smiled despite myself. "Until I saw him, I was great."

A smile bloomed on her face. “Jackson brought you home?”

To distract myself and ignore my mom’s eye contact, I moved towards the kitchen to pour myself some water. “Yeah, we hung out for a bit.”

“That’s great. Obviously, you found a dress; I can’t wait to see you in it,” she gushed as she moved towards the bag.

“You can look if you want; I’m gonna shower,” I said, walking to my room.

“Pea…?” I stopped short at the sound of her voice.

“Yes, Mom?”

She fidgeted with her fingers, her lips moving wordlessly. “Is everything okay?”

“Never mind. It’s nothing,” she said, waving a hand at me.

My brows furrowed. It was clearly not nothing; I knew my mom enough to know that. “Are you sure?”

“Of course, don’t worry about it,” she said.

“O-okay,” I said as I headed for a

shower.

Lying in bed that night brought back so many memories of what had happened earlier. I could still feel the tenderness between my legs each time I walked, which proved it wasn't a dream. I couldn't help my smile each time I thought about Jackson.

The happiness was short lived, though, since I looked at my phone and saw all the texts from Brendan.

What if people started to think I was a slut willing to sleep her way to the top. Just a broke gold-digger eager to take advantage of an older man. Did it even matter that it wasn't true?

A lump formed in my throat; I could easily check my phone to see what was happening, but I was still too scared to see what the world had to say about me.

I had a feeling it wouldn't be good.

Chapter 18

Lily

How was I supposed to focus on getting dressed for the gala when I was too aware of my sudden fame? Cassie was entirely focused on the gala and all the hype on social media. Everyone was talking about the glamor and fashion, just like Jackson had told me.

Cassie was kind enough to avoid talking about me. As tempted as I was to hear public opinion, I didn't want it to ruin my day.

I knew the expectations were high, and though I wasn't usually one to worry about these types of things, I didn't want to make a fool of myself or Jackson. Despite the added speculations and the gossip that would come after today, I had to rise above it … for Jackson, my mom, my friends ... and myself.

As I sat in my room, I remembered what Jackson had said about sending money to my account. I bit my lip, wondering how he'd

even known my account information, to begin with, but I quickly found the answer. Jackson was a man of means, and anything he wanted to know about me, he'd find out at the snap of his fingers. I didn't know whether to be scared or intrigued.

I reached for my phone and logged into my online banking, not knowing what to expect. However, when I saw the large sum of money sitting there, my mouth fell open, and I remained rigid on the bed. I blinked a couple of times and shook my head to clear it, but the figure remained the same. There were thousands of dollars there – clearly more than I'd ever need for the gala.

"What the hell," I whispered to myself.

Apparently, despite me saying I didn't want his money, he'd still found a way to give it to me. I wanted to yell at him, thank him, scream, dance, all of it. Still, he needed to take it back, didn't he? I couldn't keep this!

But as I continued pondering the matter, I realized it would cover some of the bills. I was about to get up to tell my mom about it when I realized she had a job and wasn't at

home at the moment.

Later that day, Cassie returned to help me with hair and makeup, a blooming smile on her face as she placed her bags on the bed.

“God, I’m so excited!” she squealed.

“I’m glad you are. I have a knot in my stomach I can’t seem to get rid of,” I confessed, making a face at Cassie, who lightly chuckled.

“Trust me, everything will be fine. Everyone thinks you’re beautiful anyway,” she said, raising a brow.

I bit my lip, wanting to know more, despite knowing better. “Not many people know who you are as yet, Lily. Your face was barely showing in some of those photos anyway.”

“Some,” I mumbled.

Cassie sighed. “Babe, you had to know this was coming when you agreed to be his fake girlfriend. Not everyone will have the best to say, but you’re doing this for Jackson, not them.”

“At what cost, though? It doesn’t matter

if Jackson and I want more. Rumors could ruin his business and do worse to me and Mom. People out there already think I'm a gold-digging slut."

Just as she was about to reply, my phone rang, and I stared at the screen, glanced at Cassie, then answered Jackson's call.

"Hi," I murmured.

"Hello," he said, his voice soothing and warm. "Are you having fun getting ready?"

"Cassie's here with me; she's gonna help me with a few things."

"I could have some professionals come to you for your hair and whatever else you need. They could pamper Cassie as well and-"

"Jackson, I promise I have it all under control," I said, seeing the way Cassie was watching me, and for the first time ever, I felt shy around her.

"I believe you, I just want to spoil you," he said softly. "Of course, I know you can handle yourself and make your own choices. I won't push."

"Good," I said.

There was a short silence; I glanced at Cassie to find her smiling from ear to ear, and my cheeks heated.

"I miss you," he said, and the breath hitched in my throat, warmth flowing through my body.

"It's only been a day," I reminded but didn't hear an answer, so I sighed. "I miss you, too."

"I can't wait to see you – to touch you. Call me when you're almost done getting ready," he said.

"I will. Bye," I said.

Even after I ended the call, I didn't put the phone down right away because I knew what was to come with Cassie, and I somehow wanted to prepare myself for it.

When I finally did, she wore a smirk as she held up a makeup brush. "You miss him, huh?"

"I do," I softly said, surprised that she even heard me.

"Something happened between you two, didn't it?" she asked, shuffling closer to me to

hear what I had to say.

I stayed quiet, not sure if I wanted to share this with her or keep it as my own amazing secret.

“Yesterday, when I left, something happened, didn’t it?” she pushed.

There was no hiding the truth from Cassie.

“We slept together,” I confessed.

Her mouth fell open, her eyes wide as she stared at me. “No fucking way!”

I nodded, managing a tight smile as confirmation.

“O.M.G., it finally happened. You’re no longer a virgin,” she said, covering her mouth with her hands as she stared at me with incredulity before sitting next to me like I was going to tell her the best story in the world. “How was it?”

I tried to hide my smile but couldn’t. “It was … better than I thought possible. Amazing.”

“Fuck, I can’t believe it.” She paused, then looked at me differently. “You must

really have feelings for him. This isn't fake anymore ... is it?"

My brows furrowed, and I rubbed the nape of my neck, not even knowing what to say.

"I don't think so, but ..." I said, my voice low, my eyes searching the floor as if it held the answers.

"You're not the type to just hop on a guy because he's hot, Lily. There has to be something that you feel beyond just the surface level," she raised a questioning brow.

"There is. He makes me feel ... seen and understood. He doesn't force anything. He talks with me like we're on the same level and really listens. I can laugh, set boundaries, all of it. I just feel safe and right with him," I said, each word more honest than the last.

Cassie smiled. "You want to be with him, don't you? Despite all the talk of just wanting this to be a one-day thing, you want to."

I took a longer than usual breath. "I do."

Cassie squealed. "I told you!"

“But what if all this just blows up in my face? His world is so different from mine. I don’t know that I’ll fit, and I don’t know if he wants serious,” I said.

“Rich or not, every relationship requires adjusting. If you really want this, then you will. You all have to talk.”

I nodded. “I guess you’re right.”

“Shit, I’m still trying to wrap my head around all of this. This is insane!” she said, her voice overflowing with excitement. She shook me. “I’m so happy for you. You deserve something wonderful.”

Giggling, I covered my face and squealed. She laughed and kept me talking while taking care of all the preparations.

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Two hours later, fully dressed, I stared at myself in the mirror and couldn’t believe my reflection was mine. It was like I’d transformed into a completely different person, but in the best way.

“Shit, I know my stuff,” Cassie said, blowing off her makeup brush.

I grinned. “You could seriously do this professionally.”

She rubbed my shoulders. “I might just quit college and do this full-time.”

“I mean, it’s not the most insane idea, but you’re already this far; you should just finish,’ I said.

“I know,” she sighed.

Just then, my mom came into the room, her hands instantly moving to cover her mouth when she saw me. I smiled brightly, watching the tears that brimmed in her eyes as she moved towards me.

“Oh, Pea, you’re beautiful,” she cooed.

“Thanks, Mom,” I smiled, running my hands along the dress. “Cassie here is the real miracle worker.”

Cassie scoffed and fanned me off. “It makes the work easier when the canvas is beautiful.”

I blushed. “You guys are gonna make me cry.”

They smiled. A car honked outside, and my heartbeat picked up pace, knowing exactly who it was. I'd called Jackson some minutes ago to tell him he could pick me up. It had to be him.

"Ugh, I think I want to use the bathroom," I groaned. "Did I brush my teeth? Did I put on perfume?"

"Yes and yes." Cassie laughed. "Oh shush, that's just the nervousness talking. You'll be fine."

I sucked in a breath and glanced at myself in the mirror one last time, wanting to make sure everything was perfect. I loved the dress and loved that each seamless cut complemented my body. It was as if it was designed for my body and my body alone. Cassie had done my hair and makeup to perfection, making sure every subtle color worked well with the overall look. It wasn't too much, but it did a lot to enhance what was already there.

I left my room just as the door rang and paused a little before I pulled it open. When I did, Jackson was standing there, dressed in a

navy-blue suit, his hair slicked back just enough to emphasize his angular face and show the sharpness in his gray eyes. His lips parted when he looked at me, his gaze trailing over my face and along my body. He had the same look in his eyes back at his apartment, and I knew what it meant. My stomach fluttered as he devoured every inch of me with the look in his eyes.

"A princess indeed," he finally said after a moment. "You look stunning."

I smiled. "Thank you. You look amazing, too."

Chapter 19

Jackson

In all my years of traveling the world and being in an industry where beauty was commonplace and plain was a curse, I'd never met anyone who glowed like Lily. She was timeless and delicate but had a strength inside that made her more.

She stood before me without any idea of just how striking she was or just how lucky I felt to be in her presence. My tongue tied itself in knots, not sure I was capable of impressing her at all, with anything I owned or was.

"Lily," I breathed.

"It's as close to perfect as I can get," she whispered, her blush staining her cheeks.

"You're better than perfect in so many ways," I assured.

The long V-neck cut of her dress gave the tiniest hint of her full breasts, the small

bondage-like waistline hugged her slender waist before the satin fabric flared at her hips. It flowed all the way to the floor, leaving a small trail behind that hinted at the simplicity yet the luxuriousness of the dress. The dusty, pale blue color brought out the beautiful hue of her eyes, highlighted by makeup today, making them seem even brighter and more beautiful.

Even after we got into the limousine, I couldn't keep my eyes off her and still wasn't sure how to make words work.

"Jackson, you're making me self-conscious," she murmured. "I'm still just me."

"You are always astounding. I can't believe you're going to be on my arm tonight, that you *want* to be on my arm tonight when you know my past, you know I'm a workaholic, you know I'm just ... me," I said softly.

"I like 'just you' more than the man in magazines that always has a perfect answer," she says, holding my gaze intently.

I leaned into her, taking a whiff of her fresh scent and whispered in her ear. "As

stunning as you look, I can't wait to take this dress off you."

She turned to me, her gaze falling to my lips. I was as tempted as she was and didn't wait a moment longer before I pressed my lips to hers, tasting a hint of strawberry. The second her tongue met mine, it was done. Who needed the gala when I had her, kissing me hungrily, promising me more than a romp in bed or expensive shopping trips?

My hand found the slit in her dress and traveled along the soft skin of her thigh. She eagerly parted her legs, driving me insane.

"We should take the long way to the gala," I rasped as I caressed her inner thigh, knowing I was just inches away from her pussy.

"This is a good reason to be late," she agreed.

I pressed my fingers against the fabric of her panties and collected her gasp as she reacted to my administrations. I rubbed her slowly, kissing her tenderly before I slipped my fingers past her panties to stroke her clit. She was already wet for me, and with another

stroke, I knew she'd be dripping.

She broke the kiss and sucked in a breath just as I pressed my fingers deeper. She reached for my hand and met my gaze…

"I- I think we should save this for later," she said, her voice soft and slightly disjointed. "I don't want to, but I won't want to stop either."

I nipped her bottom lip before I sighed. "You're right, or maybe we could just ditch this whole thing and head back to my place."

She smiled. "Sounds tempting, but we have to do this."

I knew she was right, but I cupped her chin. "If I had to choose between the gala and you ... you'd win every time."

The car suddenly came to a stop, and I withdrew my hand, staring down at her flushed face. She quickly rummaged through her purse and retrieved her lip gloss, carefully reapplying with a small mirror that she also had in her purse. I smiled to myself, seeing that I'd managed to get her this flustered in less than five minutes.

Cameras were already flashing outside, along with plenty of voices. I considered locking the door and insisting we go around back, but Lily took my hand.

“Together?” she asked. “I can tell you don’t like this.”

“It’s my least favorite part. I like seeing my friends and having some fun, but the press is terrible. They focus on the stupidest things – looks, designers, who’s with who,” I admitted.

Lily bit her lip. “I’m not excited about this either. Staying in and playing a trivia game sounds better. I’ve never been a party person.”

“Now you tell me,” I teased.

“You didn’t ask,” she retorts. “Our first date was exactly my speed.”

“That was real, too. Nothing fake that night,” I whispered before kissing the back of her hand. “Everything will be fine. I’ll be at your side all the time. I won’t let you go for a second.”

The driver came around and opened my door, the noises becoming louder.

I glanced at Lily. “Let me calm things a bit before I help you out.”

“Jackson, Jackson!” the people shouted, from civilians and paparazzi.

I adjusted the lapels of my jacket and walked around to Lily’s side, pride bursting from my chest even before I opened the door. When I opened it, she looked up at me, a bit of terror in her eyes.

She pulled me down for a second. “I’m rethinking the arriving late thing.”

“Oh really?” I teased.

“I know this place with a really nice view, and not many people know about it, so we could … we could go there and have a hot night,” she barters. “Or I could pay for dinner, and we could-”

“You can do this. You’re strong, decisive, and capable of handling yourself. You’ve proven it over and over,” I promised.

She took a slow breath and nodded, sliding her hand into mine. “We’ll keep each other calm, and everything will look better tomorrow.”

Was it possible to fall in love with someone this quickly? I wanted her by my side through everything, every bit of stress and fun.

I extended my hand to her, and she placed hers in mine before she stood beside me. I wrapped my hand around the small of her waist and pulled her by my side.

The world fell away as I stared down at her dark eyes, her pouty lips, the nervous way she chewed the inside of her cheek. I squeezed her tighter against me. “Together.”

The crowd was in a frenzy, the flashes getting brighter. Lily blinked, but as we stepped forward to face the crowd, her smile widened. I knew it wasn’t because she was overjoyed by what she saw but because she knew how to behave. This woman was definitely more than any other.

Chapter 20

Lily

My heart pounded like a thunderous drum in my chest, each beat pulsing through my veins. Every camera flash threatened to blind me or make me choke on a breath.

I found little comfort in Jackson being beside me, his hand firmly gripping my waist as he held me securely. He was the only thing that didn't scare me, but I kept my smile in place, determined not to ruin this for Jackson or make myself a laughingstock.

The closer we walked on the red carpet, the more frightening it became, and I finally understood what it was like to live their life for even a second. I had to stop myself from blinking repeatedly, from falling over my feet in an attempt to dodge the lights. I just wanted to hide and use Jackson as a shield.

How the hell did he put up with this?

"Jackson, Jackson!" they shouted, their

voices filled with urgency. “Who’s your date?”

My head swirled at the question, and in the midst of all the chaos, I glanced at Jackson. He seemed to be as cool as a chilled glass of lemonade – this was clearly something he was used to. On the other hand, I was trying to focus on getting through the night than anything else.

We briefly paused for some photos before Jackson led me inside the huge building, with its grand space and a red carpet that extended up the steps. The media were still inside, some at the sides with cameras while some did interviews.

I spotted a celebrity, and my mouth fell open. Somehow, throughout all of this, I’d failed to realize that Jackson wouldn’t be the only famous person here. This place was filled with people I’d seen on TV and prayed to meet someday. I’d never imagined I’d be in their company like this, and the realization was mind-blowing.

“Jackson, a photo please!” someone shouted. Jackson pulled me close. The cameras flashed, and I presented my best

smile.

"Could we get one with just you?" they asked, and I knew it was time for me to step aside.

When I did, I watched as Jackson stood to take a few photos. He was a natural, knowing exactly how and where to stand and giving his best angles. There was no surprise since he was a former runway star, but it was intriguing to see. He looked so good, and I was happy to be by his side. I covered my mouth as I watched him, noticing that the smile didn't reach his eyes.

I giggled. This was the man that wanted me, the man that looked best, flushed and wild, his eyes hazed with lust, his hair a mess ... or with his big, boyish smile or pizza sauce on his chin.

He returned to me shortly after, holding my hand this time while he waved at a few people. "I saw you laughing over there, what's on your mind?"

I stood on my toes to whisper in his ear. "I was wondering what they'd think of you with sauce on your chin, looking all cute."

He shook his head at me. “You’re terrible.”

“I’m fun,” I teased.

“You are currently the reason I’m so nice for cameramen,” he informed, rubbing my lower back. “How are you doing with it all?”

“This isn’t something I want to get used to,” I informed seriously. “It’s overwhelming. They’re so demanding.”

“Believe me, know. It never gets easier,” he sighed.

“Jackson Reid, could we have a minute?” one woman asked, a mic in hand.

“You’re looking incredible tonight; mind telling us who your date is?” she asked, sticking the microphone in Jackson’s face.

He looked down at me, and my body reacted the way it always did when he looked at me, but this time, my heart felt full. I thought I was going to burst.

“This is the beautiful Lily,” he said.

“Are you guys a couple? This is your first public outing with a woman since Jessica

Lynn," she said.

Jackson's smile faltered at the mention of his ex, but it was back up in the next second.

"Yes," he answered, his grip slightly tightening on my hand. I could only smile, feeling like the luckiest woman in the world.

"How did you guys meet?" she was quick to ask.

"I'm afraid that's all we have time for, Jane; thank you," he said before moving away.

He leaned to my ear after we walked away. "I hope I answered right," he said.

"You did," I said, despite wondering why he avoided the questions. I remembered what Paul said, to answer with the bare minimum. But I hadn't been asked a single thing. Like I was an accessory.

For the next ten minutes, it was just photos and questions about Jackson and his relationship he did his best to speak as little as possible on. He introduced me to a few people that clearly held him in high regard. I could

tell by the way they spoke to him and treated me like I was one of them.

When the dinner started, and we took our seats, we were paired with another couple that Jackson seemed thrilled to be with.

“This is Linda; we met at a couple of fashion shows some years ago when I was in that industry, and this is her husband, James,” he introduced.

“Pleasure to meet you, Lily,” Linda said. “That dress looks stunning on you.”

“Thank you,” I smiled. “it’s a pleasure meeting you as well.”

Linda was slender, with the body of a model, despite having retired. She wore a bright, red lipstick highlighting her wide lips and dramatic eye makeup that made her hazel eyes pop. Her husband seemed quieter and a little younger, keeping his eyes on his phone.

As we immersed ourselves in light chatter, my gaze caught someone walking through the seated crowd of people. It didn’t take me long to realize it was Jessica Lynn – Jackson’s ex – who was accompanied by an elderly man, Louis Grey, a famous actor and

entrepreneur.

Jessica commanded the attention of everyone close by with her long legs, housed in a short black dress with an avant-garde-type top that stuck out at the sides. Her look was goth: black lipstick, dark makeup with blonde hair gelled to the back and dramatic edges.

"Well, then…" Linda commented.

I glanced at Jackson, who glanced her way but didn't seem the least bit fazed seeing her.

"Well, I must say, Jackson, you definitely upgraded," James said, and I blushed.

Jackson chuckled. "I certainly have."

He reached under the table to caress my exposed leg. He winked at me like we were sharing a secret, and it took every ounce of willpower to keep from suggesting we get out of there right then.

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The event was almost at an end, but I

needed a break. Everyone wanted to know everything, wanted answers, or talked around me without ever speaking to me. Plus, my face hurt. So I excused myself to the bathroom.

I took a few breaths, let my smile drop and rubbed my cheeks before rolling out my neck.

When the bathroom door opened, I glanced over. There she was, Jessica Lynn, who seemed even scarier up close. With different makeup, she'd be shockingly sexy … not soft or delicate, but sexy.

She looked me over and gave me a vicious smirk before she came to the neighboring sink I was at. I quickly washed my hands and was about to head out when the sound of her voice put me at a halt.

"You're Jackson's date, right?" she asked, focusing on me entirely.

I cleared my throat. "I am."

She laughed dryly. "You look like a child playing dress up."

"I'm very much an adult," I bit back firmly.

She twisted her mouth. “So, are you guys real, or is he trying to make me jealous?”

I nodded. “We’re dating.”

Her lips were drawn tightly together. “I see, well best of luck with that.”

My brows furrowed in curiosity. “W-why would I need luck?”

She sighed almost tiringly. “Well, you’re in the industry now, and things can get pretty hectic – overwhelming even. Jackson has been doing this type of thing all his life; he’s used to it by now, but you, you’re new, and if you’re not careful, this world of ours will pull you right in and suck the life out of you. You’ll wake up one morning and barely recognize yourself, and by that time, it’ll be too late. It’s happened to plenty of people, and when they wash out, it’s a hard change. I just don’t want to see someone else lose everything, Jackson included.”

I swallowed hard. “Is this some ploy to scare me or-”

“Oh, never that, sweetheart. I’m speaking from experience. Being in the spotlight has its perks, but it’s brutal. In the

beginning, Jackson is everything, but then he works late, tells you to fend for yourself, the dates stop, the sex stops, the money stops flowing ... and then you wonder how you ever ended up in that place," she trailed off, her gaze roaming over me. "Why confine yourself to a life like that just for someone you barely know?"

I stood there staring as I processed her words. It wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear, but it reminded me of all the reasons I'd hesitated when he first asked me.

"Men like Jackson need to be with people from his world for a relationship to have a hope of lasting ... and you don't belong."

Chapter 21

Jackson

"That went better than expected, didn't it?" I asked as I pulled off my tie and threw it to the sofa.

"It really did. I enjoyed myself, though I might have to get my eyes checked after this," Lily said.

I chuckled as I approached her, cupping her gorgeous face in my hands. "I know it wasn't easy or half as fun as people say, but thank you for being there, for making it better."

She smiled up at me. "It was my pleasure."

I kissed her softly, feeling myself harden immediately. Even though I'd had her recently, twice, it felt like years. I was starving, a madman for her and her alone. I gripped her ass, pulling her against me, grinding her against me so she'd feel exactly

how hard I was for her.

“I think we left off somewhere in the limo,” I hinted.

“A very good place,” she agreed. “Better than the cameras.”

I spun her around, and she gasped when her body crashed against mine, her pert little ass rubbing against me perfectly. I moved her hair off her shoulder and kissed up her slender, soft neck. She arched against me, giving me more room to kiss her, and I suckled gently on her skin, loving the breathy moans that left her throat.

“I’ve never wanted you as much as I’ve wanted you tonight, and trust me, I’ve always wanted you,” I said while I reached for her zipper and dragged it down.

The small of her back was exposed to my gaze, stopping short before the gentle rise of her ass, showing just a hint of her lacey panties.

“I want you so much,” she breathed, her voice airy and soft. “Every time you touch me, the rest of the world is gone.”

I peeled the dress from her body, watching as it fell, pooling at her feet. All that remained on her skin was her panties, and I planned on tearing them off her shortly. I reached for her breasts from behind and squeezed them gently as they filled my palms. She moaned, and I hardened against her back, straining against my clothes.

"You did so well tonight, handled everyone with so much grace and strength even though it was your first time," I rasped against her throat. "So much more than beautiful."

Lily turned to face me, the innocence gone from her face as her eyes filled with unfiltered lust. She reached for my buckle while maintaining eye contact and freed me of my belt. My heart pattered in my chest when she dropped to her knees, and my body buzzed with anticipation as realization dawned. I didn't think it was possible for me to get harder, but seeing her knelt there, her face flushed, eyes on me, half naked ... I had no chance with this woman.

She pulled my pants down, followed by

my boxers, and I watched as my full length sprung free in front of her, nearly tapping my belly. Lily looked up at me with those beautiful dark eyes that seemed more accentuated with the makeup. She reached for my length and stroked me slowly like I was brand new.

"It's yours, Princess," I said, my voice husky and deep. "*I'm* yours."

"Only mine? Really mine?" She asked, focusing on the head of my cock.

"Everything between us is real. We didn't get a chance to fake a damn thing," I hissed.

With that, she clasped her mouth over the tip of my cock, sending a flood of warmth through my entire body. I briefly closed my eyes, the feeling even more intense when I was only focused on the sense of her mouth wrapped around me. Her warm, wet mouth felt wonderful, reminding me of her pussy, which was just as wet, tight and ... mine.

Lily popped off me and licked up my length, running her lips along me as well. Even her breath on my cock made me tremble.

“How do I taste in your mouth, Princess?” I asked her; she looked up at me, her lips wet.

“So good.” Her voice was just as soft as her touch.

“Take it,” I instructed.

And that she did, opening her mouth wide before she took my cook deep in her mouth. Her teeth skimmed me, and I hissed. She opened wider, trying hard to take more of me. She hummed and closed her eyes as she sucked. Then she took me deeper, over again and again. She stopped trying to go slow and drooled over my cock, her lips catching the wetness.

“I swear, you’re something else, Lily,” I said as I crouched over just a bit and reached for her hair to run my fingers through.

She took me deeper but gagged, breathing heavily while saliva leaked from her lips. It felt so good, so tight, but I didn’t want her to overwhelm herself.

“Take your time, baby,” I said, caressing the back of her head.

She swallowed and gave a small nod before she took me into her mouth again and used the other hand to gently squeeze my balls. I sucked in a breath and closed my eyes as her sweet mouth slid up and down my cock, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

I unintentionally bucked a little, a bolt of pleasure plummeting through me. The gargling sounds of her struggling to take my dick in her mouth nearly did me in.

“I’m gonna come soon, Princess!” I announced.

She increased her pace, and I gritted my teeth as the pressure began to build more and more. Lily didn’t stop for a second; she just kept sucking me off until I couldn’t control myself.

I bucked into her mouth a couple of times, loving the sound of my cock at the back of her throat.

“Do you want it?” I asked, trying to hold out long enough to get an answer.

She gave a small nod, and with one last thrust, I spurted cum in her mouth. She was caught a bit off guard, blinking a little when it

hit her in the mouth, but she collected every drop even as it seeped from the corners of her mouth. When I pulled out, she swallowed as if it wasn't her first time.

"You always surprise me," I said as I lifted her off her feet.

She used her thumb to wipe a drop from her lips, and then she smiled at me. "How did I do?"

"If you keep this up, you're not ever going to leave my bedroom," I said, meaning every word.

She laughed, and I muted the sound with a kiss that had her moaning against my lips.

"I want to fuck you," I said, trailing my hands along her nakedness. "Hard, deep, over and over until you never forget exactly how I make you feel."

Her cheeks reddened. "What's stopping you?"

"Nothing whatsoever," I replied, and she grinned, squealing when I picked her up in my arms and carried her to the bedroom, still

kissing her.

Her legs wrapped around me, her breasts pressing against my chest was perfect for me. I groaned as I kissed her hungrily, dropping her onto the bed at the last minute to work my fingers into her.

She gasped and lifted her hips. “Jackson, please.”

“I love how your voice changes when I’m inside you,” I growled.

I used my fingers to make her come, determined to make her feel as good as she made me feel every single second I was with her. When she finally came, yelling my name, trying to close her legs around me, I grinned.

“Good girl, princess,” I groaned.

She sighed and giggled, motioning for me. “I want you, everything, Jackson.”

“Which is exactly what I want to give you,” I agreed.

I climbed on top of her, kissing her hungrily as I grabbed one thigh and pulled it further up on the bed. I groaned at my view.

“You’re impossible to resist,” I moaned.

I slid into her completely, and she gasped, reaching for me.

I kissed her again as her arms wound around me. I slid my hand into her hair, pulling back so she had to look at me. “Eyes on me, princess, just me.”

“Yes,” she panted.

I fucked her just as promised- hard. I threw restraint to the wind, taking her like I needed, giving her everything within my power. I couldn’t get enough of her.

I changed the angle slightly, then slid my hand between our bodies, rubbing her clit in fast circles as she whined and pinched one of her nipples.

“You’re naughty,” I said with a wicked grin.

“You make me naughty,” she argued.

I increased the pace just for that comment, slamming into her until I could hear how wet she was with every single thrust, could hear my balls slapping against her skin between my groans.

I knew she loved it; she was calling my

name as if it were a mantra, and she clawed my back, nibbling my jaw like nothing gentle was enough.

"Oh, Jackson, I'm close!" she yelled, gripping me tighter. "So close. So, so close."

I parted her thighs, holding them down on the bed as I pounded into her again and again, happy to lose myself in pure ecstasy here and now. "Fucking ..."

I gritted my teeth as she spasmed around me, her pussy trying to pull me in deeper, so I gave her everything I could, grinding deep inside her as I bent down to bite her neck. She shouted my name and snapped her eyes shut as her orgasm ripped through her.

I jerked out at the last second, spilling on her inner thigh as I shuddered and emptied myself.

Nothing was better than being with Lily. I'd do anything to keep her right here with me. Anything at all.

Chapter 22

Lily

When I woke up, I felt the smile on my face before I opened my eyes. Jackson was still against me, his foot brushing mine, confirming that I wasn't living in a dream.

"Good morning," he said gently.

"Hi," I answered as I turned to snuggle up to him. He kissed the top of my head and pulled me even closer to him.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Did we actually sleep?" I asked, and he chuckled.

"I couldn't get enough of you,"

My body thrummed with a dull, bitter-sweet ache, still trying to recover from the events of last night. He'd spent most of the night inside me, fucking me rough, and though I'd loved it at the time, welcomed it, even demanded it, now all I could do was

think ... think about how the gala had been, what his ex had said to me and if we could actually have a future.

"Lily?" He asked. Jackson looked down at me, concerned. "Do you want me to run you a hot bath?"

I shook my head. "I want to stay here for a bit longer."

He gently used his hands to smooth back my hair giving me more comfort than I'd expected.

"Now that the world officially saw us together, my face must be across every single tabloid," I said.

"Are you ready for that?" he asked me, then paused.

"Is it possible to be ready for that?" I asked seriously.

He stretched his legs. "I don't know. My fame didn't happen overnight, I eased myself into it."

"Maybe we should hide out here today," I mumbled. "I'm sure even my mom knows about everything, but we can just ... be."

“You know I wouldn’t have a problem with that,” he said gently but studied my face. “But you need to know, don’t you?”

“I do. I want to pretend it doesn’t matter, but it does.”

“It does,” he agrees. “I told you a while ago that if you were overwhelmed, I’d fix it, but I don’t know how much fixing I’d be able to do now.”

“Well … let’s see the damage,” I said, crossing my fingers and hoping it was better than I expected.

I reached for my phone and checked the messages, surprised to find that there was a ton from strangers, both on social media and my private cell phone number. I had loads of missed calls, too, a few from people I knew.

“What the hell… how did they even get my number?” I asked, glancing at Jackson as I eased up from the bed. I grabbed the sheet to cover myself, sure that the paparazzi could see us even now. “How … how …”

“The media has ways,” he said as my eyes returned to the messages and notifications. I browsed social media and

wasn't shocked to see many people were talking about me, making speculations.

So, who is Jackson's mystery girl?

Of course, Reid chose a beautiful girl to be by his side for the biggest event ever, but isn't this 'Lily' a bit too young?

Who is Lily Edwards?

How long will this last? Are they even together?

Those were just some of the questions they asked in posts and comments. I didn't see half of it but knew it was there. My mind spiraled; some of the comments weren't even kind, even though these people knew nothing about me.

Jackson doesn't usually date nobodies. What makes this one so special? My heart panged.

I'll give her a week to crumble.

Is Jackson taking them younger now?

Will this one last longer than Jessica?

Definitely another gold-digger. We'll hear more about her after Jackson dumps her.

I heard she dated Brendan Foster, too. She's certainly climbing her way up the ladder of rich dicks.

My heart ached in my chest, and tears pricked my eyes. Jackson's phone buzzed, startling me, and I watched as he reached for it before I was back to paying attention to my own phone. Jackson slid from the bed to answer a call, his voice becoming muffled as he went to the other room.

A few minutes of sitting there, and my head started to spin, sweat beading on my forehead. I dropped my phone to the side and curled up in a ball. The safe little bubble I'd been in popped that easily. I sniffled.

If they knew my name ... was my mom okay? Oh god, my mom. I needed to check on her. I looked up and found Jackson standing at the doorway, his expression wary, suspicious.

"Were you dating Brendan Foster?" he asked.

I frowned, already feeling overwhelmed. "What?"

"Brendan Foster. Were you a thing?"

I rubbed my temple, already feeling flustered. “W-We dated back in high school for a short while. What’s this about?”

He glanced at his phone before he moved towards me. Without saying another word, he held up the phone to me. I almost gasped when I saw the picture of Brendan and me last weekend at his party. The one where he was nearly kissing me. He swiped the screen, and there was another of us diving into the pool.

“Have you had a boyfriend all this time, Lily?” he asked. As my mouth opened to provide an answer, he continued. “You made it seem like you weren’t used to this sort of lifestyle, but this is Brendan Foster, right? I didn’t even realize until Paul mentioned it.”

Of course, Paul. Is a photo all it took to undermine his trust in me? I gripped my phone tightly. “Brendan and I aren’t a couple. He tried to make a move on me, but someone got it on camera. I said no.”

“He was at your house the other day, walking out like he was used to being there,” he scoffed.

I got up from the bed. “Jackson, I don’t need to explain myself to you. I’ve told you the truth. How could you think … I was a fucking virgin, for God’s sake,” I said as I searched for my clothes.

He was quiet at that, but the look on his face spoke a thousand words. My eyes stung as I was struck with disbelief that Jackson would react in such a way.

“Lily.” His tone was softer this time. “Surely you understand where I’m coming from,” he said, brows slightly furrowed.

“Trust me, I see it. You’re assuming the worst because I’ve begged you for money, right?” I demanded sarcastically. “Because I begged you to give me a chance. Clearly, I’m just a gold-digger because why else would I want to be with you? All I do is ask you to take me shopping, to take me to events, and then brag about it!”

He took a slow breath. “Explain this to me so there’s no miscommunication then.”

“You already made up your mind about it, so there’s nothing to talk about,” I hissed despite my watering eyes.

He swallowed as he stared at me with narrowed eyes. “Do you still have feelings for him?”

“Of course not! He came back to the house to confront me about you, and that was it. There was nothing going on,” I said, feeling the tears slide down my cheeks.

“Lily…”

“Take me home, please,” I said as I hugged my shoulders and went to get my things.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I scoffed. “You’re *not* sorry.”

He stared at me.

“Because your image is more important than any trust we’ve built. At least I know now that you’re so sure you’re unlovable rather than weeks or months for now,” I said, my heart aching in my chest.

“I don’t think-”

“You clearly don’t believe I could want you for more than money or sex! If you believed it, if you believed I cared about you, if you cared about me beyond some fucking

attraction, you wouldn't have come in here suspicious and demanding."

"I want to talk about this," he insisted.

"No, you want to accuse me."

We glowered at one another for a long moment, and he rubbed over his face. "I have to have people to protect me for a reason, Lily. I'm a C.E.O. I'm a billionaire, and anyone would love to take advantage of that."

"I didn't think I was *anyone*," I whispered.

"You're not. You're not, Lily, I swear, you're-"

"I need to borrow a shirt but don't worry, I'll return it," I said simply. "And I'll give you back all the money you sent me because I haven't used a cent."

"Don't do this. Let's talk about this, please. I lost my composure for a moment, but I believe you. I do." Jackson took my face between his hands.

He *didn't* believe me, though. He wanted to, I could see that, but he didn't. I pulled his hands from my face. "I want to go home. We

need to cool off."

He handed me a shirt, and I grabbed a belt, trying to manage some kind of style. I grabbed my dress and waited for him at the door.

When he returned, he was fully dressed, with the coldest expression I'd ever seen on his face. I walked to the elevator, and we silently went down to the lobby, then the car. On our way to my house, he turned to me.

"I didn't want things to end like this," he said softly. "But I will let you go if that's what you want. I will. If that's what you need, I'm willing to do it."

"Accept the money when I send it back," I whispered, even though my heart actually hurt in my chest. "That's what I want. And I want ... I want time to process."

He nodded, his jaw tight.

The rest of the ride was silent, every thought in my head focused on not crying. If I did, I knew he'd comfort me. If he comforted me, I'd forget why I needed to think things

through.

It wasn't just his lack of trust, it wasn't just the press, it was me. We'd been on one real date, *one*. I'd just fallen into him, fueled by desire and passion and his warmth. But there was more to life than that.

I wanted to go back to college, I wanted to free my mom from riding the poverty line. I wanted to be more than an accessory for a wealthy man.

Could I do that if I was just known as being his? Could I tolerate the press, the media, the eyes always inspecting, the people waiting for me to crash and burn?

When I got to my house, my head perked up at the vehicles that were parked there. Upon closer inspection, I realized most were paparazzi.

I muttered a curse under my breath and tried to mentally prepare myself for the whirlwind that would soon attack. Without looking back at Jackson, for fear of further breaking my heart, I shoved the door open and ran to my door.

"Lily, we'd like a comment on you and

Jackson Reid. Was that him in the car?" One man asked over the sea of other questions thrown at me.

"How did you guys meet?"

My mom opened the door when I was close enough and pulled me inside before closing it behind me. I looked at my mom, and just like that, the tears broke free.

***

After showering and getting into some comfortable clothes, I joined my mom in her bedroom. When I realized no one was banging on the door and there weren't any voices outside, I peeked out. Only one police car sat there.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The cops came, said Mr. Reid sent them. They told the press they were trespassing and needed to leave," she smiled.

I rolled my eyes.

"Pea, I'm sure Jackson didn't mean to offend you. Jealousy can make you say stuff

you didn't even imagine saying," she said.

I frowned. "I don't care about jealousy. I care about him not trusting me to care about him for more than money. I care about him believing other people before even talking to me."

"Oh, Lily," she sighed.

"He doesn't think much of me, Mom. And even if he did, I don't know if I'm ready for all this. Clearly, if this is what happens at the start of our relationship, it'll only get worse. Every move monitored. How can I exist outside of him?" I asked.

"He deserves another chance," she said.

"Why?" I hissed. "Because he's the great Jackson Reid?"

"No, because you light up when you talk to him, when you're around him," she soothed, brushing her fingers through my hair. "I'm not saying it's easy, but you're not weak."

I sighed. "I don't want to get hurt, and I don't want to regret anything. I've already been warned by two of his…associates that I don't have a place in his world beyond

cleaning his house. I'm being called all sorts of names on the internet, and this has all just been…overwhelming. Maybe it's good that it ended like this," I said, the words heavy on my tongue to say. "It could have gotten so much worse."

My mom grew silent. I looked at her and realized how restless and uncomfortable she looked. She couldn't meet my eyes and kept looking at the picture of Dad.

"Mom, is everything okay?" I asked.

She rubbed her hands together and cracked her knuckles. "I – I met with Jackson after we cleaned his house. He … he offered to give me money since you wouldn't accept."

A painful lump formed in my throat, and my brows furrowed. "Mom, please tell me you didn't take it," I said, my voice almost breaking.

"I did, Pea," she confessed, and I gasped. "We needed the money, and time was running out. Because of him, we have the house."

"Mom, I would have figured it out!" I exclaimed.

“How?” she asked. “We had four days before the eviction notice came when he asked to talk to me. I paid up all our utilities and all the overdue fees with rent.”

Tears brimmed in my eyes. “The two of you went behind my back without my knowledge!”

“I’m your mother, Pea. I needed to make a decision.”

I bounded from the bed, raking my fingers through my hair. “You both … how dare he think he couldn’t trust me. He’s been the one ignoring my boundaries. Giving you money, giving me money. I told him to stop! He just kept pushing. It’s like he wanted to make it, so I needed him!”

She shook her head. “No, no. It’s not like that. He wanted to help. He wanted to make sure we were okay because he cares because he’s been in this situation.”

“H- How much money did he give you?”

“More than enough,” she said. “I still have some left,” a smile formed on her lips.

I gasped. “I can’t believe you. Why

wouldn't you tell me something so important? I can't… I'm so disappointed," I hissed before I headed to my own room, closing the door behind me.

There was too much to unload. Anger, disappointment and sadness all bottled into a giant ball that threatened to crush me. "Not fake," he'd said, but there's only two reasons a person pays off another. To make them stay or make them leave. He got plenty while I was around ... now he'd get me to walk away, too.

Chapter 23

Jackson

I was reckless, my thoughts on nothing but Lily. I stared at the unmade bed that had been left there ever since she left, and flashes of her in it filled my mind. I could still smell her inside the house and knew that if I went to lay my head on my pillows, I'd smell her there.

I wanted to kick myself over and over for how things went down – for how stupid I'd reacted when I saw that picture. In that moment, all I saw was Jessica. Lying, scheming, over-eager Jessica. Lily had gone from a woman I could love, maybe already loved, to someone dangerous, a threat to all I'd created: my pride, my heart, my business.

After seeing the look on her face, the hurt, the anger, I'd realized how big of a mistake I'd made. She'd been right. She'd asked me for nothing but my time and my

honesty. She'd never wanted the money.

My phone buzzed, and I saw the transfer notice from my bank. She was sending back the money. I hesitated over the options and accepted it. I'd been putting myself first this whole time.

I'd let her make choices, but I'd forced her to be with Paul, I'd forced her to go to the gala, I'd paid her mother, paid her, I'd never asked her opinion on things she really had a choice on. And this whole time, after that first date, I'd been planning to make her mine on my terms for a whole lot longer without ever asking what she wanted. I'd guessed or only accepted her answers when I was buried inside her.

The elevator dinged, and I went to the living room to find Paul.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Hollywood's most talked about man," he said with a smile on his face. "By the way, I'm willing to forget what you said to me at the store just because everything ended up working in our favor."

"Did you know?" I asked.

"About her and the kid? Not at first. I

did more digging, saved you some heartache, huh," he said, patting himself on the back.

"Did you know it was bullshit, that she was single the whole time, or did you leave that part out?" I demanded.

He blinked at me. "What ... what are you talking about? Jessica said-"

"Jessica said ..." I scoffed. "Of course. Of course. I can't believe ... you're fired," I said.

He frowned. "How is it that a girl you've known for only a week is able to make you fire me – a friend you've known half your life?"

"Our friendship was not on the line; your job was," I stated, and Paul scoffed. "But the friendship is on thin ice, considering you have no problem listening to Jessica more than me."

"Well, I don't have to worry about that now that she's gone," he said softly. "And when it comes to Jessica, I know her. I know she loves you, she could be good for you."

"Bullshit. You believe what she tells you because she's sweet and knows how to

charm," I snort. "I made a mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean,, I shouldn't have shown her those pictures, and I shouldn't have confronted her about it. I regretted it as soon as I did."

He sighed. "Miss Edwards doesn't have a place –"

"Her place is wherever she chooses. If that means by me, I'm happy. You and I weren't always rich. Is it so easy for you to forget that?" I ask.

He sat down and ran his hands over his face. "I want to keep us happy, wealthy, able to do what we want. Lily was a threat, a stupid risk."

"And I'm allowed to take risks. We both are! Money isn't everything. A business isn't a life. We're more than our jobs and wallets, Paul," I say and shake my head. "I wish we were around more people who remembered that."

He shook his head in disbelief. "What's gotten into you? It's like this woman has placed a spell on you or something. Why can't

you see reason?"

"Because there's none to see. Lily is the purest person I've ever met; she sparks my soul, and she makes me feel more alive than I've ever been. She gives me reason, and for the first time in my life, she's the only woman I've ever considered a future with." The words came flowing, and I had no intention of stopping them. I wanted to bare my soul and give Paul a chance to see how I felt and hear how much impact Lily had on my life.

"It has only been a few hours, but I miss her, I want her by my side, I want to be the reason she smiles. I want to enjoy my time with her doing simple things without worrying she's bored or unsatisfied. I want to be able to be imperfect with her and be myself without any polish. She welcomes it, she likes that version of me a whole lot more," I say, feeling more myself than I have in years ... without Lily by my side.

Paul visibly swallowed, silent, as he stared at me with a certain softness in his eyes I'd never seen before.

"You love her?" he asked as if it was a

fact if nothing else.

I clenched my teeth and rubbed the nape of my neck. “I really think I do.”

He nodded slowly as if soaking it all in. “Then you should go get her.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I want to give her some time, see if she’ll come around or even cool off.”

“Okay, well, whatever you decide, I’m here,” he said slowly. “Tell me more about Jessica. Tell me what I’ve obviously been missing out on. I’ll listen.”

I managed a smile despite myself. “Thank you.”

***

It had been three days since I’d seen Lily, and each second was more agonizing than the last. I’d thought that being at home would help stop me from missing her, but it only reminded me of how happy I was when she’d been here. So, I opted for the office instead, burying myself in work for hours on

end, trying to avoid the media, who still tried their very best to get an insight into our relationship. At nights, it was a glass of wine before bed, the emptiness in the house reminding me of how much I'd lost.

I cleaned my home myself, cooked and ate it, even though it wasn't a five-star meal. I did everything on my own, determined to prove I could, to get back in touch with the side of myself that didn't need constant pampering.

I re-evaluated what I was giving employees, fixed things with Paul, went to the movies alone, undercover and tried to do things that I'd lost touch with just to experience something beautifully normal.

Still, I missed Lily. I wanted to know what she'd think of my cooking. I wanted to hear all about her hopes and dreams. I wanted to be there when she took on the world and won because I knew she would. I wanted so much more than a week with her.

***

The following day, I woke up and got ready for work. Just as I was about to step outside, the house phone rang, and I paused, moving to answer it. It was the front desk.

"Hello," I greeted.

"Mr. Reid, Lily Edwards is here to see you," the receptionist said.

My heart fluttered in my chest, almost rendering me breathless.

"Send her up," I quickly said before disconnecting the call.

A thousand thoughts rushed through my head, but anticipation suffocated everything. Even if she yelled, even if she said we were done, at least I'd know. I didn't want it to be that way, but I'd accept it if it meant she'd be happy, at peace.

When the elevator door opened, I froze, standing right in front of it, waiting for the metallic door to part so I could see her. When I did, my heart expanded in my chest. She stepped out and stood still when she saw me, our gazes holding for a brief second, the house silent as we just looked at each other.

She took a slow breath, and I prepared for the worst, making myself accept it would be the best for her.

Chapter 24

Lily

I wanted so much to confront Jackson on going behind my back, but deep down, I'd missed him. Since we met, a day didn't go by that we didn't talk to each other, and not having him now had opened up some empty feeling deep inside me.

I wanted to snuggle up beside him. I wanted to go on more dates, to earn him, to have everything I knew we could have. The potential tasted so sweet, and I ached for the happiness and freedom I felt with him.

He made me happy, there was no denying it, but I was hurt and angry and didn't think there was a simple fix. Maybe Jackson and I were only good for a short time, and the perpetual 'maybe' that had hung over our heads when we talked about what more we could share. Jessica and Paul were right, I didn't belong in his world – never did.

Plus, the media had gotten the photo of Brendan and me at his party and had been quick to paint me as a gold-digging slut, though I'd never asked for a penny from either man. That didn't seem to matter to them; the photo of Brendan and I was taken the weekend before the gala, and apparently, I was too comfortable with him. So comfortable that the idea of friendship was non-negotiable.

All of a sudden, I'd gone from a mysterious beauty to a gold-digging opportunist. I'd trapped myself inside the house because I was afraid to go out and see people look at me as if I were trash – to hear them talk to me as if I was exactly that. And the worst part was, I'd known this was going to happen, but I'd gone along with the gala regardless because I'd started to fall for Jackson Reid.

It didn't affect him at all. He was untouchable. It was just my future that was hurt, my present that was ruined, and my heart that was about as strong as confetti.

Why hadn't he come to get me? Why hadn't he made some huge grand gesture so I

could be mad, but I'd have known how he felt? Why did I have to chase him – a nobody eagerly following the most eligible somebody?

I didn't even realize I'd started to cry until a droplet rolled down my chin and dropped on my lap. I sniffed and quickly brushed it away, determined to confront him. It was time to go before I changed my mind, so I headed out, saying a brief goodbye to my mother, whom I had not completely forgiven. I just wished she'd told me. Maybe it would feel less like a betrayal.

***

I took a taxi to Jackson's apartment, dressed in denim shorts, a large t-shirt and a baseball hat. Luckily, the press didn't swarm the place. Maybe they knew better than to attack Jackson himself. On my way to the receptionist's desk, I received a few stares but adjusted my hat and kept it moving.

"I'm here to see Jackson Reid," I said.

"Just a second," the woman said as she

reached for the phone and sent out the call. A few seconds later, she gave me a nod and gave me the go-ahead.

I entered the elevator, and the easy jazz music just set me more on edge. I had to get the words out before he touched me and before he gave me a look that melted my heart.

So, I closed my eyes until the elevator door opened.

Jackson was standing right there, staring at me. My stomach fluttered, and I wanted desperately to run into his arms – feel their strength as they wrapped around me. My body called for him, but my mind was made up.

I came here for a reason, and it wasn't to cuddle. Reminding myself of that had me boiling once again, and I scowled as I looked at him.

I dug into my purse and withdrew the stash of money I'd withdrawn. The last of what he'd given my mother. I marched towards him and slapped it to his chest. He frowned as he caught it, some falling to the

floor.

"What's this?" he asked, brows furrowed.

"We don't need your money!" I hissed.

"What?"

"You went behind my back!" I yelled, seeing the confusion on his face before realization dawned upon him. "I don't need you going around me, making plans with my mom, buying her permission and affection. We can do it on our own, and I will. I'll find a way, even if it means working three jobs!"

"I was trying to help," he whispered, looking at the money. "I know how much I wished someone would have helped me and my mother in the past. I knew how hard she worked, fingers to the bone, then still put on a smile for me. I didn't want that for you both."

My throat constricted. "We're not a charity case, Jackson. I told you I didn't want your money. I told you I wouldn't accept it for one date. You realize this cheapens everything we shared, right?"

"I wasn't trying to-"

“It doesn’t matter what you were *trying* to do,” I said before making myself calm. “Your good intentions don’t mean a thing since I told you no, and you didn’t listen. So, I will get a second job and work on paying back every cent.”

He raked his hands through his hair. “You don’t need to do that.”

I scoffed and turned to head towards the elevator since it was pretty obvious that Jackson wouldn’t see reason.

“You don’t need to do that because that’s the price of fucking up,” he said. “You’re right. I didn’t respect your wishes. I didn’t listen to you, even though you were right there, telling me what you wanted. There’s no excuse and no way to apologize other than doing better.”

My hand fell to my side, away from the elevator button. “You paid for me, Jackson. Like I’m some prize. Like I’m something you can buy, use up, then throw away.”

“No, no, princess. That wasn’t at all on my mind. I want to spoil you, and … I lost touch with every other way to do it except

money. I should have given you more time together. I should have opened up more. There are so many things I *should have* done – that I can do ... but if you're done with me, if I can't fix this ... I'll accept it."

"You won't pull strings to put me back in college?" I asked.

"Not unless you ask, even though I wouldn't need to. You're more than smart enough."

"You won't keep tipping my mom if she's able to keep working for you?"

"No. I told her that what I gave her were the pre-emptive tips," he said softly. "All I want is for you to be happy, for you to be your best self, whether that involves me or not."

I sniffed, then put my hand over my mouth, so I wouldn't give myself away.

"Lily, there isn't a damned thing I wouldn't do for you. I know I'm the reason things are bad between us. I believed Paul. I'm the reason the press is involved, and I made stupid, selfish choices."

“So, what now?” I ask.

“I’ll fight for you if you want to make this work, or I’ll let you go. It’s the only thing I can do apart from love you. This isn’t pretending; I was never pretending for even a second.”

I gasped and finally turned to face him. He stood there, eyes rimmed in red, looking like a complete mess. When had he last shaved? Were wrinkled clothes suddenly the style?

He took a heaving breath. “I’m willing to right my wrongs, I’m willing to beg for your forgiveness for as long as it takes, but what I refuse to do is hurt you again or stand in the way of what you want.”

I don’t know if I’m going to throw up or if I’m going to throw myself at him.

“I love you – maybe from the first time I saw you standing there in my living room, ignoring me to look at your phone. I know it’s stupid to say so soon, but I do. I want to keep loving you, to find more to love about you and do everything we both want together,” he says firmly.

I choked a sob as I nodded, smiling through the mix of emotions. I sniffed. “Oh Jackson…when you didn’t call or come to see me, I thought you were over me, that you didn’t care,” I sobbed.

He moved towards me. “I wanted to give you time, but I’ve always cared, Lily.”

I launched myself at him and kissed him, tears and all. It spoke of hunger and passion but also promise, and I basked in every second of it.

When I pulled apart, I drew back, then pointed at him. “Saying that doesn’t fix everything.”

“I know,” he assured, cupping my face in his hands. “But I will fix it all. We can tackle the press, I already took care of Paul, made sure he understood. Whatever we want, together, we can make it happen.”

“We should date, really date,” I said softly. “A few days doesn’t make a whole relationship, and that’s what I want with you.”

Once again, our lips joined, and I felt every rush from every touch, every kiss, every promise in the way he held me and kissed me.

“I promised to give you everything in my power to give,” he murmured. “That promise is one I’m going to keep. So, let’s stay in, watch movies, play games, and talk.”

I study his face. “You mean it?”

“Everything is a partnership now. Everything is about us. The press, my reputation, all of it comes second.”

Talking will have to wait, I decide, because I need him now. I need to share everything with him and prove to Jackson that I can give him just as much as he can give me in every way that matters.

Epilogue

Jackson

1 Year later

"This is it," I said as my gaze traveled around the interior of the house before meeting Lily's. She couldn't take her eyes off it, her eyes sparkling with wonder as she gave herself an eyeful of everything inside.

She explored the house, and I watched her, ignoring the rest of the house. Every expression on her face, the way her eyes danced over the house, her fingers trailing over the counters, all of it made this place feel like home already.

"I can't wait to start decorating," she said, flashing a grin at me before she skipped and giggled, running into the next room.

I chuckled as I followed behind, wanting to document every reaction to memory. She

stood in the middle of the empty living room, her head tilted upwards as she looked at the tall ceilings. A smile flickered at her lips. The one saved for when she was thinking intensely.

"There are so many rooms. Do we really need this much space?" She asked.

"This house can be whatever we need. Offices, our home, a place for your mom to visit, a place for us to hide away," I mused. "But most importantly, it's *ours*. Not mine. Not yours, ours."

Her reaction was everything and more, making me happier because I'd waited until this moment to show her the house I'd bought a year ago, three months after we'd reunited after the gala.

She bounded towards me, a bright smile on her face, her loose hair bouncing with every movement.

"I love it!" she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around me.

"Do you?" I asked honestly. She nodded, and I squeezed her. "I fell in love with it right away, but I hesitated, thought I lost it. But

here it was, waiting, like it knew I had someone to share it with."

"How have you kept it from me for so long?" she asked, voice laced with mirth.

"Trust me, it wasn't easy, but I wanted to surprise you with it as a wedding gift," I said, pulling her closer to me.

"Aww, babe, it's the perfect surprise. I love it."

I lifted her hand to kiss the modest engagement ring and wedding band. "I love you."

"You're not allowed to spoil me for a while now. You've already given me everything I need."

"You didn't let me pay for college," I huffed. "But I do like helping you with your homework."

"I'm serious." She sniffed. "You've done so much for me. You've bought me this home, one for my mom, and you're supporting my dreams without paying a cent. It's just a whole lot, and what have I ever done for you – nothing will ever compare."

I brushed the tears from her cheeks. “You got me back in touch with what matters. You’ve reminded me of who I want to be. Every day I wake up feeling real, not wanting for anything at all, thanks to you. You’re my wife now, and I’m going to give you the very best life there is.”

She shook her head slowly. “I love you so much, Jackson. So, so much, you won’t even understand.”

“I understand perfectly,” I said as I placed a gentle but passionate kiss on her lips.

I pressed my lips to her ear. “I can’t wait to fill this house with our babies,” I whispered, and she giggled. “Want to start now?”

She took a step back to look at me, the joy once again back on her face. “There’s no bed here,” she said as she looked around the empty space. “I guess I didn’t think about that.”

I raised a brow. “When has that ever stopped us?”

In the next second, she ran off laughing, and I ran behind her, loving the chase even more. She squealed when I caught up to her

and pulled her into my arms, kissing her until we were both laughing.

She sighed and rubbed over my arm. “So, husband, ready to live happily ever after?”

I kissed her again. “I’ve been living that every single moment since I met you.”

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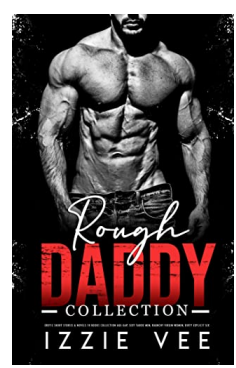

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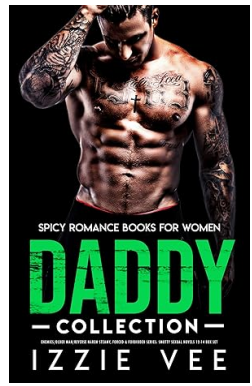

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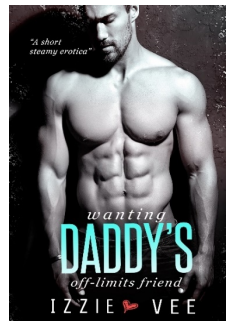

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SAMPLE

I couldn't believe that I was about to head off to college and never had a sexual experience in my life. The person I considered my boyfriend in my senior years of high school was initially the person I thought I would take the big step with but later found that he only had one intention in mind, and that was to fuck the only girl in our year who was rumored to still be a virgin – me. It had hurt, and I had broken off the relationship with a few heated words thrown at him but later realized there wasn't much I wanted out of the relationship either rather than sex.

I didn't want to be a virgin anymore, so I picked the boy that had given me the most attention and decided that he was the one.

Unfortunately, he wasn't and here I was, about to head off to college with my hymen intact.

If it were only based on desire alone, then my dream guy would be the one who came over to my house every now and then with all his charm and kindness. He was the first crush I ever had, but I knew there was nothing I could make of the relationship considering he was my father's best friend.

Connor was everything I wanted in a man; he was sweet, kind, caring, incredibly handsome, and packing for his age. He taught gym at the college that I was accepted into, which made my excitement all the more profound. Dad said that Connor would be there to look out for me as he had always done, and I … ***To continue reading get your FREE DOWNLOAD HERE.***